

Dangerous Love

INTRODUCTION

Sthandiwe is a beautiful, 27, year old lady. Although she hasn't had luck when it comes to relationships over the years, now she believes that she has found the one in the 29 year old Chris. But the problem is long distance. Chris lives in Cape Town, working as a Psychologist while Sthandiwe lives in Jo'burg working as a junior lecturer at UJ. They are both from Jo'burg though.

She just met Chris during the June holidays and they hit it off. It's been three long weeks of whirlwind romance until reality sunk in - Chris has got to go back to Cape Town. And this doesn't sit well with Sthandiwe. She has had bad experiences with long distance relationships. That out of sight out of mind kind of thing. She's had her fair share of heartbreaks due to long distance relationships. But she has no choice, does she? Chris can't stay, he's got to leave, he's got to work. How is she gonna deal with this?

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This is the morning of the day Chris is leaving. Sthandiwe is asleep in her bed. She's woken up by the ringing of the alarm from her phone on the nightstand. She rolls over and turns it off.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, baby, I asked u to wake me up 5minutes before the alarm rings, for my morning jog."

No answer. She turns and looks at Chris' side of the bed. Chris is gone.

-Sthandiwe: "What? He left without even letting me know? I cant believe this. That bastard!"

She quickly gets out of bed, furious. Completely naked. She picks up her panties from the floor next to some of her clothes, scattered on the floor. Evidently, last night was one hell of a crazy night between these two. But now Chris is gone and so are his clothes.

Sthandiwe puts on her panties and rushes out of the bedroom into the hallway.

-Sthandiwe: (yelling) "Christopher! Christopher!"

She only calls him by his full name when she's angry, and right now she's furious. Actually, she's hurt. Feels played. But as she gets to the kitchen, she finds Chris at the stove finishing making breakfast, his back on her. With his earphones on, dancing to the beat from his iPod strapped on his forearm. Sthandiwe stands in the doorway, watching him. She smiles to herself, realising how foolish she was for thinking Chris just left her like a cheap one-night-stand.

She walks over to him and hugs him from behind. Chris turns off the stove and turns to her. He plants a kiss on her lips before taking off his earphones.

-Chris: "Morning, beautiful. Sleep well?"

-Sthandiwe: "Like a vampire in a blood bank."

-Chris: "But u weren't supposed to wake up until I've delivered u ur breakfast in bed. (smiles) I saw it on some romcom once, they call it breakfast in bed."

-Sthandiwe: (smiles) "Well if I knew that my man was Chef Anthony I would have guessed that he's actually here making me breakfast when I woke up on an empty bed."

-Chris: (smiles too) "And if I knew that my woman was Gandis Sexy I would have taken some viagra last night."

-Sthandiwe: (punching him on the chest, playfully) "The porn star, baby?"

-Chris: (laughs) "It was meant to be a compliment, baby, hawu. The way u gave it to me last night..."woow" is the only word that comes to mind when I think about it."

-Sthandiwe: (suddenly becomes sad) "Well maybe it was the last time."

-Chris: "What do you mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, u're leaving today. I may not see u again, well as my man at least. Long distance relationships never work out."

Chris studies her. He sees that she means it. He takes her face into his hands and looks deep into her eyes.

-Chris: "But ours will. I promise. I love u, Thandi. And I'm serious about u, about us."

But Sthandiwe has heard these promises before, from her exes, and none of them ever kept them. So she doesn't buy a word Chris is saying.

-Sthandiwe: (removing Chris' hands) "Chris, I freaked out when I didn't find u next to me in bed a few minutes ago. I got hurt, thinking u had abandoned me. I don't ever wanna feel that way again, always worrying about what u're doing in Cape Town. Worrying about when u'll dump me."

-Chris: "Baby, I'm sorry but u're being ridiculous right now. I'm telling u, I'm not going to dump u. I love u."

-Sthandiwe: "U are only saying that now. What's gonna happen when u get lonely at night? When u meet someone else in Cape Town? I think we should just make a clean break. I better hurt now than later."

-Chris: "Baby, please listen to me. Nothing's gonna happen to us."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank u for the breakfast but I'm gonna go get dressed and go for that jog. Please leave my keys under that tile in the porch."

-Chris: "Aren't you gonna take me to the airport?"

-Sthandiwe: "Why would I do that? Why would I wanna torture myself like that? Goodbye, Chris."

She walks away, leaving Chris astonished, disappointed.

Chris: (to himself) "So much for being a gentleman."

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Later, still in Auckland Park in Sthandiwe's house.

Sthandiwe comes back from her jog. She goes to pick up a tile in the porch and finds the house key. Her heart sinks, for some reason she expected to find Chris still in the house waiting for her. She opens the front door, gets in and goes straight to the bedroom.

She puts her phone on the nightstand and curls up on the bed in a fetal position. Tears start to escape her eyes. Just then her phone rings. She ignores it. It continues to ring. Finally, she wipes her tears and takes the phone. She checks the display and sees that it's her friend, Palesa, who also happens to be Chris' sister. Actually, she met Chris when she was visiting Palesa at her home. She answers.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello"

-Palesa: "Hey chomi. Where are u?"

-Sthandiwe: "My place. Why?"

-Palesa: "Are u okay? U sound so down."

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'm not okay, Palesa. How can I be? Ur brother's left."

-Palesa: "So? It's no like u didn't know he was gonna leave."

-Sthandiwe: "I was such a fool for falling for him. As soon as he gets to Cape Town he's gonna forget about me."

-Palesa: "Oh, c'mon chomi. That's nonsense. I know Chris. He'd never do that to you. He's not that kind of guy and he loves u."

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, u'd say that, he's ur brother."

-Palesa: "I'm not just saying this coz he's my brother, I'm telling u the truth, chomi"

-Sthandiwe: "Palesa, it's over between me and ur brother. Let it go now."

-Palesa: "Over? U've ended things?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I did. It was the only way. I'm protecting my heart."

-Palesa: "Now u being childish, u know that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Bye, Palesa. Let me mourn the end of my relationship in peace."

She hangs up and resumes her crying.

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In Rosebank at Palesa's apartment. Palesa is with Sihle, hers and Sthandiwe's mutual friend. Palesa puts her phone down after the phone call she just had with Sthandiwe.

-Palesa: "I can't believe Sthandiwe right now. Can u believe that she ended things with Chris coz she thinks he'll break her heart? I mean how stupid is that?"

-Sihle: "I think u should cut her some slack. I understand where she's coming from. We both know that she's been heartbroken a number of times. So I think this is her coping mechanism of some sort."

-Palesa: "This is stupid if u ask me."

-Sihle: "We've always been the Tight Three since varsity. Now look at me, I'm happily married and u are in a stable relationship. And look at her, her relationships don't last. I think that's taking a toll on her."

-Palesa: "So what should we do to help her?"

-Sihle: "We're her friends, we have to figure something out."

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At Sthandiwe's house. Sthandiwe opens the door for Palesa and Sihle. They walk in.

-Sihle: "Friend, u can't let a good man like Chris go. This could be ur only chance at happiness. The break u've been waiting for."

-Palesa: "U can't let him leave knowing that u don't want him anymore. U've gotta go tell him exactly how u feel."

-Sihle: "Sometimes u gotta show some vulnerability to experience what love has to offer."

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, I appreciate what u're doing but it's too late. He's gone."

-Palesa: "No, he's not. His flight takes off in half an hour. We can rush u to the airport."

-Sthandiwe: "But I don't think we'll make it in time."

-Sihle: "We can try."

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AT THE AIRPORT

Chris heads for the baggage check-in and goes through.

Sthandiwe appears. She sees Chris and runs to go through but is stopped by a security agent.

-Security Agent: "Ticket please."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't have it. But u see that man, I have to see him. He can't leave before I talk to him... please."

-Security Agent: "Sorry, I can't let u through into the gangway without a ticket."

Sthandiwe gives him a dirty look.

-Sthandiwe: (screams) "Chris! Chris Motaung! Please look at me, baby."

A number of people turn around but Chris doesn't. Sthandiwe's voice is small and it quickly disappears.

-Security Agent: "Miss, are u gonna cause trouble?"

Sthandiwe frowns. She turns around to stand by a wall, out of ideas. Then she takes out her phone and dials Chris' number.

Chris standing in line in the terminal, checks his watch. His phone rings. He answers.

-Chris: "Hello."

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, it's me. Please don't hang up. I'm here at the airport but they won't let me through without a ticket."

-Chris: "Sthandiwe, what are u doing?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm apologising, baby. I know that I acted a little crazy earlier and I'm sorry, I was just scared. I love u, Chris, and I don't wanna lose u. I wanna be with u."

-Chris: "Sthandiwe, I'll call u when I get to Cape Town."

-Sthandiwe: "You're still going even though I've just opened my heart to u?"

-Chris: "Thandi, please don't do this. U know that I have to go. I've got to be at work tomorrow. Now I have a plane to catch. So, I have to go."

Sthandiwe chokes, but tries to re-group.

-Sthandiwe: "But I thought--"

Just then she feels a tap on her shoulder. She turns around to find Chris standing there with a smile. She jumps up to him, dropping the phone to the floor. Chris hangs up and hugs her tight. The hug lingers until Chris leans in and kisses her. Then pulls away.

-Chris: "Honey, I'm sorry but I really have to go. I can't miss my flight."

-Sthandiwe: "Am I selfish for wanting u to stay?"

-Chris: (smiles) "Yeah, a little. But honey, I'll say this again, u have nothing to worry about. We're gonna try and make this work. It'll be long distance and it'll be hard but we'll have weekends, leaves and holidays. U have to trust that it'll work. I think we have a pretty good chance."

-Sthandiwe: "Trust..."

Chris kisses her once more and stares deeply into her eyes.

-Chris: "I love u, baby, and I promise I'll call u as soon as I land."

Chris turns and runs back through security, leaving Sthandiwe standing there, alone. He turns and waves just before he walks through and disappears...

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Chris really called Sthandiwe that night as promised. But they didn't talk much because Chris had new patients' files that he had to go through before going to work the following day. But he promised to call Sthandiwe first thing in the morning.

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The following morning Sthandiwe got up early and got dressed for her morning jog. She left her iPod and took her phone with instead, as she was expecting Chris' call. She went for the jog, finished her two kilometres without the phone ringing. She got back to her house and went to take a shower. She placed her phone on a chair next to the shower door so she could hear it when it rings. She kept turning off the shower tap trying to hear if the phone wasn't ringing, but no, no ring from Chris. She finished taking the shower and went back to the bedroom. She put on a beautiful white dress. Sthandiwe is a neat freak and she likes to be bright on Mondays. The dress fit her perfectly, showing off her curves as if it was designed specially for her. She put on matching accessories, tied up her hair and her make up was on point. She took her laptop and some files and left for work, without hearing from Chris.

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She had three lectures to deliver that day but she wasn't up for even one, thinking about Chris. Her trust issues catching up with her and definitely getting the better of her. Thinking about why Chris hadn't called and even beginning to doubt his reason for not staying on the phone with her the previous night.

But even though she was in no mood to talk, she did what she had to do and finished all her lectures. She went back to her office after the last one and checked her phone but got no missed calls from Chris. She decided to call him but his phone just rang and rang. She kept calling him but he never picked up. Imaginations of Chris with another woman kept popping in her head, until she lost it, knocking files off her desk to the floor. As she was about to break down in tears there was a knock at her door. She tried to pull herself together before answering.

-Sthandiwe: "Come in."

Her colleague Xolisa walked in and noticed the files on the floor.

-Xolisa: "Is everything okay? Why are the files on the floor?"

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry about my files, Xolisa. What can I do for u?"

-Xolisa: "Oh, I still need u to review my paper before I can send it to Prof."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, email it to me. I'll go through it when I get a chance."

-Xolisa: " Ummh I was hoping we could do it together at my place this evening."

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I already have other plans."

-Xolisa: "Yeah?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I'm going to dance my butt off and down some tequillas in one of the clubs in town."

-Xolisa: "On a Monday?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm young and single, Xolisa. I'm allowed to have as much fun as I want. And what I do with my time is none of ur business. Please close the door behind u."

Xolisa left shaking his head. Sthandiwe packed her things and left her office.

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She got to her car and started it. But the damn car wouldn't start. So she took her bags and went to take a taxi. There was no taxi at the main gate so she decided to walk to take one by the corner of Campus Square. She heard a car hooting right behind her. She turned but didn't recognise the car so she just ignored it, thinking it's just one of those stupid guys hooting for every skirt they see. But the shiny black Audi A4 stopped next to her and the driver rolled down the window and called out.

-Driver: "Sthandiwe Blie?"

Sthandiwe got shocked to hear her name. She went to the car to check who it was. She stopped short when she found a muscular, handsome, charming and charismatic 35 yr-old guy behind the wheel.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, do I know u?"

-Driver: "No u don't. But I know u. I was at ur PhD thesis presentation in May. Prof Jansen, ur HOD, knows me."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, u also work here?"

Driver: "Yeah. Accounting department. My name's Alizwa but my friends call me Al."

Sthandiwe's eyes went straight to his ring finger. It was empty, no ring.

-Sthandiwe: (smiles) Okay, I guess I'll call u Al then."

-Alizwa: "Why are u on foot?"

-Sthandiwe: "My car wouldn't start so I'm going to take a taxi."

-Alizwa: "No, I can't let u take a taxi. Hop in, I'll take u home."

Without even thinking twice, Sthandiwe hopped in and Alizwa drove off.

-Alizwa: "I don't know anything about Sciences but ur presentation captured my attention. Or maybe it's because I was interested in the person who was delivering it."

-Sthandiwe: (blushing) Oh, thank u. I guess."

Sthandiwe directed Alizwa to her place and he went to stop right in front of her gate.

-Alizwa: "This is a big house. Who do u live with?"

-Sthandiwe: "Me, myself and I. It was my parents' but they both passed away in a car accident three years ago and I was an only child. So yeah, now I'm staying alone."

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry to hear about ur parents."

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay, I accepted it. Thanks for the ride. Do u want to come in for some coffee?"

-Alizwa: "I'll only come in if cake is also on the menu."

Sthandiwe's eyes widened.

-Sthandiwe: "Cake?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah, cake. I have a very sweet tooth, it's not even funny."

-Sthandiwe: (embarrassed) "Oh THAT cake."

-Alizwa: "Yeah that cake. What did u think I was talking about?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing."

Alizwa let out a sly smile.

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They got out and went to the house. Sthandiwe poured him a drink and they chatted a bit.

-Alizwa: (looking at her) "U look really beautiful today. Did anyone tell u that?"

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Well, not until now."

-Alizwa: "U really are beautiful."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank u."

-Alizwa: "Would u... like to go out with me sometime?"

-Sthandiwe: "As in a date?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah. A date."

-Sthandiwe: (quickly, excited) "Of course, I'd love...(she stopped herself)..."I mean, yeah, sure. That's okay."

-Alizwa: "I'm gonna leave work early tomorrow, we have this thing in Sandton. Mind if I call u after, for a meet?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not at all. Tomorrow's fine."

-Alizwa: "Perfect. (handing her his phone) Give me ur number then."

Sthandiwe punched in her number and gave the phone back to Alizwa. Just then hers rang. It was Chris. But she rejected the call.

Alizwa: "I really like ur place, I could get used to it."

-Sthandiwe: "What about u, who do u stay with?"

-Alizwa: "With my...my sister. In Rosebank."

-Sthandiwe: "No wife?"

-Alizwa: "Do u see a ring on my finger?"

-Sthandiwe: "No."

-Alizwa: "So there's ur answer."

Alizwa's phone rang. He checked the caller ID, it read WIFEY. He didn't answer it.

-Alizwa: "Ummh, this was nice, Thandi, but now I gotta go."

-Sthandiwe: (disappointed) "Oh, okay."

She walked Alizwa to the door. At the door she gave him a hug. She buried herself in his chest, breathing him in. She actually felt safe in his strong arms, hugging her tight. She looked up, her eyes met his. They gazed at each other's eyes. The moment quickly felt like it could be a kiss, until Alizwa pulled away.

-Alizwa: "I really must go. See u tomorrow."

-Sthandiwe: "Tomorrow."

Alizwa left.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Damn! This guy is fine. Perfect."

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In Cape Town, still after 5pm, Chris was pacing in his office with his phone to the ear, calling Sthandiwe, but she wasn't picking up. He kept dialling but she didn't answer. Eventually, he decided to dial her voicemail, so he could leave a message.

-Sthandiwe's voice: "Hi, u've reached Sthandiwe Blie, uMamTshawe, please leave a message."

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, I know that u're mad at me right now and u have every right to be, but please pick up so I could explain."

He hung up and waited a few minutes before dialling her number again. But still she didn't pick up. So he let it ring until it reached her voicemail and he left another message.

-Chris: "Baby, my day got hectic so early in the morning. I had a pile of work to catch up on since I was on leave. My schedule was very tight, it was one appointment after the other. That's why I'm only seeing ur missed calls now. I swear I didn't ignore them on purpose, I was busy. But still, I'm really sorry, babe. Please call me back."

He hung up. Everything he was saying was the truth but was Sthandiwe going to believe him? He started packing his stuff, getting ready to go home. His 28 year-old beautiful assistant, Penny, knocked and walked right in, carrying some files.

-Penny: "Mr Motaung, here are the files u requested."

-Chris: " Thank u, Penny. I'm taking them home with me."

-Penny: "Do u...maybe want to go grab a bite to eat before u head home?"

Chris just looked at her.

-Penny: "R-ight. I'm being inappropriate right now, aren't I? I mean, u're my boss, I shouldn't have asked u that."

-Chris: "No, don't worry about it. But I'm sorry I'll have to turn u down, I just want to head straight home."

Penny's face dropped. She was hoping he'd say yes, she's been crushing on him since the day she came to work in this med centre, and that was in January of that year. She just stood there like the statue of liberty, feeling embarrassed. Chris packed the files Penny just brought in in his briefcase and walked to the door.

-Chris: "Come, Penny, I want to lock up."

Penny finally snapped out of it and rushed out of Chris' office to her desk. Chris locked up and left for home. On the way he tried Sthandiwe again, but still she didn't answer.

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MEANWHILE AT STHANDIWE'S HOUSE

It was now around 8pm, Sthandiwe was lying in the couch, blankly staring at a the tv. She didn't go to club, she just said that earlier because she was angry and stressed. And now, as few hours had lapsed, that stress had also subsided. She was thinking about Chris, about their relationship. She finally got up and decided to take her phone and listen to Chris' voice messages. She heard him explaining and apologising but that small voice "he's lying" was making circles in her mind. Of course, she loved him but her trust issues were definitely trumping everything. Causing her to not buy his "excuses." Her dishonest exes had really messed her up.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Loving u, Chris, is just proving to be a torture to my soul."

She didn't call him back but decided to open up the University's webpage instead, and looked up Alizwa's name under Accounting Department staff. And there it was, Dr Alizwa Zakhe. She logged in on Facebook and checked him out. She found his profile. She read the posts on his wall, and they were all general posts, nothing about his personal life. She went on to check his photos. In all of them he was so handsome and immaculately dressed. And he was alone or with male friends in all of them. No wife, girlfriend or even a kid. Sthandiwe smiled to herself, clearly taken by this guy, and already imagining the possibility of herself with him.

Until her fantasy got disturbed by Palesa's call. She hesitated, didn't wanna pick up her call because she knew what she was gonna talk about and she didn't wanna go there, at least not at that moment. But she answered anyway.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello"

-Palesa: "Hi, chomi. How're u doing today?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm okay. Whatsup?"

-Palesa: "Nothing much. When last did u talk to Chris?"

-Sthandiwe: "Last night. Why?"

-Palesa: "He just called me asking about u. Says u're not taking his calls. May I ask why?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, u may not. Look, Lisa, u are my best friend and I love u. I really value our friendship, and I don't want us to ruin it, don't u?"

-Palesa: "Of course, I do."

-Sthandiwe: "Then be my friend, not my boyfriend's sister. Don't fight ur brother's battles for him. Don't get involved in our fights. Just stay out of it."

-Palesa: "Okay, friend, I hear u. But can't I at least advise u as a friend?"

-Sthandiwe: "As long as u're not advising me about ur brother, it's cool."

-Palesa: "Ay, I give up. But just know that I'm here whenever u need to talk, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "I appreciate that."

-Palesa: "Okay then, goodnight."

-Sthandiwe: "Night."

Sthandiwe hung up and dragged her mentally exhausted self to the bedroom and went straight to bed. But under those covers her mind worked overtime. Thinking about the future of her relationship with Chris. And of course, Alizwa's images kept popping up in her head, distracting her thoughts about Chris. This cycle in her head kept on until she fell asleep.

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The following morning, Sthandiwe overslept. She woke up late with her head throbbing. She couldn't go jogging because it was already late. So she rushed to the bathroom. Took a shower, got dressed and rushed to take a taxi to work.

She arrived at work at exactly 7:50am and her first lecture was gonna start in 10minutes. And she still needed to start at her office first before going to the lecture hall. So she rushed up the stairs and finally got to her floor. As she was rushing down the corridor to her office she bumped into Xolisa, and he blocked her way.

-Xolisa: (smiling) "Oh, hey. Good morning."

-Sthandiwe: "Xolisa, please, I'm not in the mood. Just get out of my way, I'm running late for a lecture."

-Xolisa: "U're only coming in now? But I thought I saw ur car in the parking lot when I drove in."

-Sthandiwe: "It spent the night there. Yesterday it wouldn't start so I took a taxi home."

-Xolisa: " What's wrong with it?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know. I didn't check, I was in no mood for that. Besides, what do I know about cars except for driving them?"

-Xolisa: "Okay, let me check it for u before u overreact and call a tow-truck. It's probably the battery or just another minor problem."

-Sthandiwe: (already leaving) "Okay, thanks. But now I gotta jet off. I'll come to ur office after this lecture."

-Xolisa: "Sure."

Sthandiwe left Xolisa standing there, watching after her. In the one year that Xolisa had been part of Sthandiwe's department he'd asked her out twice but she turned him down both times. But he never stopped trying to be a hero to her every chance he got. This car problem was another "hero" moment for him.

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After her lecture, Sthandiwe, went to Xolisa's office and they both went to the parking lot to check out the car. Xolisa asked for the keys, he opened the car and got in. He tried to start it, but still it wouldn't budge. He got out and went to open the bonnet. He got shocked to find out what the problem was.

-Xolisa: "Sthandiwe, come see this."

-Sthandiwe: "What's wrong?"

-Xolisa: "Look. The battery cables were deliberately cut."

-Sthandiwe: (looking at the cut cables) "What? Who could do something like this to my car?"

-Xolisa: "Unfortunately, I can't help u with that."

-Sthandiwe: (looking at Xolisa, deadpan) " What about u? U wouldn't do something like this to me, would u?"

-Xolisa: (laughing, thinking it's a joke) "What? Of course, not."

But Sthandiwe couldn't shift her eyes off him. She kept staring at him. Xolisa realised it wasn't a joke.

-Xolisa: "Thandi, come on. Really now? This is absurd. Why would I do this to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because, Xolisa, u like being my knight in shining armour. Maybe u wanted to be the one coming to my rescue even now. U probably think I'll eventually fall for u. But let me tell u, that's never going to happen. I only see u as my colleague, nothing more. Make peace with it."

-Xolisa: "Okay, now this is ridiculous to the point of being offensive. I didn't fuck up ur car. And I only help u because it's in my blood, I'm a nice person by nature. U don't want me, u made that perfectly clear a while ago and I accepted it."

Sthandiwe studied his eyes, she thought to herself "okay, he's telling the truth."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's just that I don't understand, who could do this and why?"

-Xolisa: "I don't know but don't worry I'll get someone to install new cables for u right away. U won't take no taxi today."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank u, Xolisa. I really appreciate it."

-Xolisa: "Don't mention it. U'll repay me by reviewing my paper."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure thing."

Xolisa stepped aside, took out his phone and dialled the person he was talking about to come fix the car. Sthandiwe stood there, trying to figure out who had sabotaged her car. And only one thing stuck in her head, Alizwa's voice "Why are u on foot?" The question he had asked when she met her the day before.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "How the hell did he know that I have a car? I mean, it's not like every member of the staff here has a car. So why did he assume I have one? Why did he find it weird that I was on foot? Could he have done this? Is it possible that him meeting me yesterday was no coincidence?"

But she quickly brushed all that off by saying:

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Ugh..he probably didn't wanna undermine me by suggesting I don't have a car."

Xolisa finished the phone call. And came back to Sthandiwe.

-Xolisa: "The guy will be here soon."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank u."

The machanic came indeed. Sthandiwe's car got fixed and she drove home in it after work.

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She got home, parked the car and went inside the house. The moment she stepped inside, her phone rang. It was Chris. She rejected the call. The phone immediately rang again but this time it was her friend, Sihle. She answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey chom."

-Sihle: "Chomi yam, how are u?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. How's it going with u?"

-Sihle: "Good. But, I actually need to ask u for a favour."

-Sthandiwe: "Shoot."

-Sihle: "U still remember that I have an interview at SABC tomorrow morning at 8?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. How could I forget?"

-Sihle: "Well, here's the thing now: hubby left with the car this morning, he went to Bloemfontein so now I'm not mobile. And you know how I hate waking up too early. Meaning if I could take a taxi in the morning I'd probably be late for the interview."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, so u wanna come sleep at my place so u could be closer to ur interview point?"

-Sihle: "Yeah, that's if u don't mind."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't be silly, chomi. Of course, I don't mind. What time are u gonna get here?"

-Sihle: "Maybe around 7."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, but thing is I'm going out soon and I don't know when I'll be back. But don't worry, I'll leave the house key for u, under that tile in the porch."

-Sihle: "Okay, thank u, chomi. See u later."

-Sthandiwe: "Later."

She ended the call and went straight to the bedroom.

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She took off her clothes and went to the bathroom to take a quick shower, preparing for her date with Alizwa. She finished and went back to the bedroom. She put on a nice navy dress, black stilettos and let her long her down. As she was doing make up touchups, her phone rang. It was Alizwa. She answered quickly.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello."

-Alizwa: "Hey u. U haven't changed ur mind about our date, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, not. Why would I?"

-Alizwa: "Good then. I'm on my way to u now. I'll be there in ten."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, see u in ten."

They both hung up. Indeed, after 10 minutes Alizwa was there. Sthandiwe was already waiting for him in the lounge. He knocked and Sthandiwe took her handbag and rushed to the door. She opened it and there he was, the "perfect" guy on her doorstep, smiling, showing his beautiful white teeth. He was wearing a navy perfectly tailored Giorgio Armani suit and a crispy white shirt.

-Sthandiwe: "Hi."

-Alizwa: "Please tell me it's coincidental that we're both wearing navy."

-Sthandiwe: "Purely."

Alizwa let out that dazzling 24 carat smile again. And Sthandiwe was now blushing.

-Sthandiwe: "So, where are u taking me?"

-Alizwa: "Let it be a surprise."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, then. Shall we?"

-Alizwa: "Sure."

Sthandiwe stepped out and locked the door. Alizwa curiously watched her hiding the key under that tile

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After leaving the key for Sihle, Sthandiwe walked with Alizwa to his car that was parked in front of her gate. He was driving a silver Mercedes Benz AMG GLE63 on that day. Alizwa went to open the door for her. She got inside and put the seatbelt on. Alizwa got in on the driver's side, started the engine and drove off. For about a minute of driving there was complete silence in the car. They just kept glancing and smiling at each other. Each with inner thoughts about the other. Sthandiwe was not only mesmerised by his expensive fragrance, the same one she was breathing in the day before when she gave him the first hug, but she was also looking at his designer suit and his obviously expensive wrist watch, an Ulysse Nardin. She thought to herself "How does he get to afford all this? I mean, we work for the same institution. Yes, I know that his post level is above mine but still, I'm certain that with his salary he can't afford all this." But those thoughts in her head quickly disappeared like vapour. She was just taken by this guy, impressed. On the other hand, Alizwa's thoughts were a mystery, until he broke the silence.

-Alizwa: "U look absolutely beautiful in that dress."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank u. U don't look so bad urself."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "That line is so cliché. I thought u were one of the few original people."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling too) "U're so not funny, u know that?"

-Alizwa: (smiling still, and looking at her in the rear-view mirror) "But that smile on ur face says otherwise. And I must say, u have a very beautiful smile. It's captivating."

Sthandiwe was now blushing like a school girl. Alizwa kept charming her until they got to where he was taking her. It was a short drive to Braamfontein.

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They got there and Sthandiwe was pleasantly surprised to see where he had taken her.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh my, The Orbit? (Jazz Club)"

-Alizwa: "Live music performances."

-Sthandiwe: (excited) "And I love live music. How did u know?"

-Alizwa: "When I like someone, I make it my business to know everything about them."

He said that already getting out of the car. That answer, that line he'd just said didn't sit well with Sthandiwe. Bells were ringing in her head. She was now paranoid because of what had happened with her car. She thought to herself, "Has this guy been stalking me?" But that thought got distracted by Alizwa opening the car door for her to get out. She took her handbag and got out. They started walking toward the entrance of The Orbit. But that line was still bugging Sthandiwe until she snapped. She violently grabbed Alizwa's arm so he could stop walking and look at her. Indeed, Alizwa stopped and turned to her, confused.

-Alizwa: "And now?"

-Sthandiwe: (realising just how wrong what she just did was) "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have grabbed ur arm like that. But I'm serious, I want to know. How did u know that I like this?"

Alizwa was honestly confused.

-Alizwa: "Look, I'm sorry I didn't know that this was gonna upset u."

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, I'm not upset. I just want to know."

-Alizwa: "Why is that so important?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just answer the question, please."

-Alizwa: "Okay. Still remember me telling u that I know ur HOD and promoter, Prof Jansen?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

-Alizwa: (gently) "Well, yesterday, after I left ur place I called him and asked him to help me out. I asked if he happened to know anything that u like and yeah he told me about this. Is that good enough an answer for u?"

Sthandiwe remembered that of course Prof Jansen knew about her love for live music because on her birthday earlier in the year she had asked the department staff (her colleagues) to not bother buying gifts for her but to rather take her to see a live band. She was now feeling so ashamed for overreacting.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have reacted this way."

-Alizwa: "It's okay."

Seeing that she was now feeling embarrassed, Alizwa, smiled sincerely and looked with clear eyes, right into hers.

-Alizwa: "I forgive u. And I'm sorry too, I shouldn't have gone and asked ur superior about u. And I promise I won't do it again. It's just that I wanted to do something special for u."

Sthandiwe was surprised by how disarming Alizwa was being. She couldn't help but smile.

-Sthandiwe: "No, it's okay. We're cool. U haven't done anything wrong. Except, I didn't think u'd pick a place like this for our first date. I thought u'd take me somewhere more private and quieter so we could get to talk and actually know each other better."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "Don't worry, we still have our whole lives to know each other. I'm not going anywhere."

Sthandiwe liked the sound of that. She smiled and Alizwa took her hand and they walked inside.

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They enjoyed the live performances and it was now time for them to leave. They walked out and to their car. They got inside.

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Thank u, Al. I really had a great time tonight."

-Alizwa: "I'm glad u enjoyed urself."

He came closer and looked at her. His eyes met hers, searching for a sign she understood. He leaned in and kissed her. She responded. They kissed, a long passionate kiss. Until Alizwa broke it off by whispering in her ear - with his deep bedroom voice...

-Alizwa: "Let's get outta here. What do u say?"

-Sthandiwe: "And go where? We can't go to my place, my friend's there. It'd be inappropriate."

She knew that Sihle wouldn't approve of her latest shenanigans and she also knew that this would definitely reach Chris' ears. And she didn't want that. Yes, she still loved him but she was also confused, still uncertain about their future together. And in the meantime she decided to just live a little. They say

live in extreme fear of something long enough and there are high chances of u ending up becoming it or doing it. That's exactly what was happening to Sthandiwe, she was cheated on a number of times and she was now afraid that any guy she ends up with would cheat on her, up until she decided to do it first. This was her coping strategy, avoiding a heartbreak. And cheating with a catch like Alizwa was so exciting to her. He made it easy.

-Alizwa: "And we can't go to my place either. I stay with my sister. Remember?"

-Sthandiwe: "Now what?"

-Alizwa: "Hotels are there for a reason."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm game. But firstly, lemme SMS Sihle and let her know that I'm not coming home tonight."

-Alizwa: "Okay, go ahead."

Sthandiwe took out her phone. When she turned on the display, there they were, three missed calls from Chris. He must have called when she was still inside The Orbit but she didn't hear the phone ring. But even if she did hear it, it's doubtful that she would have taken his call. Because even now she just ignored those missed calls and started typing the message for Sihle. "Sorry friend, I won't make it home tonight. But all the best with ur interview in the morning. Break a leg " She pressed send and turned off the phone immediately after that. She didn't want Sihle to call back, asking a lotta questions. And she also didn't want to be disturbed by Chris' calls.

-Sthandiwe: "Done. Let's get outta here."

Alizwa switched off his phone as well. Then started the car and drove off.

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They drove to one of the 5-star hotels in Braamfontein. They got a room and Alizwa paid for it using cash, not a credit card. They had to take an elevator to their room because it was on the second floor. As soon as they got inside the elevator, they started making out. It got to the second floor and they stumbled out, with their tongues still down each other's throats. They easily found their room because it was just opposite the elevator. Alizwa quickly opened the door and they stumbled inside quickly as if they were being pushed. They just couldn't wait to have each other. Sthandiwe pushed the door shut and instantly kicked off her shoes. She immediately took off Alizwa's jacket, threw it on the floor and snapped all the buttons of his shirt and took it off, showing his six pack. Meanwhile, Alizwa was battling with the zipper of her dress, trying to open it but it wouldn't budge. He finally decided to just snap it and it gave in. He quickly removed her dress and bra. She was now naked. He started unbuttoning his pants. Then, in one swift, powerful jolt he yanked her to him, pinning her naked body to his. He kissed her long and hard, then lifted her off the ground and carried her to the bed, their lips still joined. His strength was just another turn-on for Sthandiwe, she was completely losing her mind. He threw her on the bed, got on top of her and started planting wet kisses all over her body. Sthandiwe was now moaning with

pleasure. Alizwa kicked off his shoes and took of his pants together with his boxers, no time to waste. And Sthandiwe was now taking off her panties. He got on top of her again.

-Sthandiwe: (whispering in his ear) "I want u inside me, now."

It was a "now or never", the moment had arrived.

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Meanwhile in Cape Town, in Chris' house.

Chris was in his home office, working in his laptop. But he just couldn't concentrate. He couldn't stop thinking about Sthandiwe. So, he took his phone and called her again. But it went straight to voicemail. He dialled again, still it went straight to voicemail. He left a message.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sami, what's going on? We haven't talked in two days, u ain't taking my calls. Are u still mad at me? But, sthandwa sami, I explained and apologised...(he sighed)...I love u, I hope u still know that."

He ended the call and rested his head on the desk. Stressed. Hurt.

Even though Chris was handsome and a perfect example of human anatomy, he was never a player. He believed in love and he loved hard.

He truly loved Sthandiwe. In fact, she was the first woman he'd been with in 18 months, since his girlfriend of three years left him for a businessman. But now Sthandiwe was messing with his head.

Insert #6

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Sthandiwe and Alizwa made love until the early hours of the morning. After that they fell dead asleep.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe overslept, she woke up around 6:30, clear-headed. Her eyes moved to the clothes scattered across the floor then to Alizwa who was sleeping peacefully right next to her. She took a deep a sigh, feeling ashamed of herself for sleeping with a man on their first date, a man she knew

nothing about. She quietly climbed out of bed, took her handbag and made her way to the bathroom. She went to the sink, quickly rinsed her face and dried it. She stared at herself in the mirror, not liking the person she'd become. She thought, "What the hell happened to Sthandiwe Blie with morals?" That's when she came to making a decision, that she wouldn't let this thing with Alizwa go any further and that she'd focus on her relationship with Chris. Then she took out a moisturiser, a comb and a hairband from her bag. She moisturised her face, combed her hair and tied it up. Then placed everything inside the bag again, and walked back to the bedroom. Alizwa was still sound asleep, drained from the rough night they had. She grabbed her bra and dress from the floor and put them on. But the zipper of her dress wouldn't close, Alizwa had broke it the night before.

-Sthandiwe: (quietly) "Shit. What am I gonna do now?"

She grabbed Alizwa's jacket and put it on to cover up her bare back. The jacket wasn't her size obviously, but it matched perfectly with her dress as they were both navy. She picked up her underwear, rolled it nicely and put it inside her handbag. She took her shoes and quietly walked out the door, leaving Alizwa still sleeping. She made her walk of shame to the elevator and got inside. Once inside the elevator she put on her shoes. Took out her phone and turned it on. She got a message that she had voice messages but she didn't listen to any of them. The elevator got to the ground floor, she got out and moved briskly across the lobby, past a busy receptionist and out the exit. She went to catch a taxi home. On the way she was praying to not find Sihle still in the house, she was in no mood for her questions. Sihle was 4 years older than Sthandiwe, she was 31, married and she hated the kind of bullshit that Sthandiwe just did last night.

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Sthandiwe got to her place at 7:15 and found Sihle still in the house, in the lounge, but about to leave for her interview.

-Sthandiwe: "Good morning, chomi."

-Sihle: "I'm not sure if it's a good one for u though. U look exhausted. Where have u been? And whose jacket is that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Aren't u gonna be late for ur interview?"

-Sihle: "Don't u worry about me, I'm leaving now, now. But I think the question u should be asking urself is "aren't u gonna be late for work?"

Sthandiwe just sighed her off.

-Sihle: "I'm leaving now and thanks for accommodating me."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure. All the best with the interview."

-Sihle: "Thanks."

Sihle left and Sthandiwe rushed to the bedroom. She was really running late for work. She took off her clothes and put them in the laundry basket then hung Alizwa's jacket on a hanger in the closet. Then took out blue jeans, a white T-shirt and a blue denim jacket. She wasn't feeling like dressing up that day, anyway there was not time for that. She went to take a shower, came back, lotioned her body and got dressed. She put on white sneakers, tied her hair again and applied no make up, there was no time. She took her things and left for work.

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She arrived at work at 8:30. And luckily her only lecture for the day was at 8:55. She went to conduct the lecture and came back to her office. She sat behind her desk and listened to her voice messages. One was from Sihle asking where she was spending the night at, and three were from Chris telling her just how much he loved her. She started thinking about the time they'd spent together before Chris had to go back to Cape Town, and about how happy they were. She found herself saying this out loud:

-Sthandiwe: "Let me go get my man."

It's funny that it took her messing up with Alizwa to realise just how special what she had with Chris was. She logged in on her computer and booked a flight ticket online. She found one and it was leaving at 13:30. She went to Prof Jansen and asked to leave work early and he didn't have a problem with that. She went back to her office and wrapped up some paper work. At 11:30, she started packing up her stuff. She was about to leave when she heard a knock. She went to open and she found a courier guy at the door. The guy handed her a box and asked her to sign. She did and the guy left. She opened the box and inside was a new dress and a card that read "Sorry for ruining ur dress last night. Please accept that one as a replacement. Love, Al." It was a designer dress. But Sthandiwe didn't seem that impressed. She put the card and the dress back inside the box and put it on the shelf. She took her things and left the office. She got to her car and didn't waste time by starting at home but drove straight to the airport. She had her car parked securely and got her boarding pass printed (just in case). While she was still waiting for her flight, she googled the address of Chris' work place. She found it. The time came and she went to board her flight, without even calling Chris to let him know that she was coming. She wanted to surprise him.

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In Cape Town.

It was around 17:30. Chris was still at his office at work, working on his laptop. His office door was open so Penny, his assistant, just walked right in. She stood in the doorway, watching him work. He stopped working, distracted by the figure standing in front of him. He looked up.

-Chris: "Yes, Penny. What it is it?"

-Penny: "U know, I always wonder what ur girlfriend thinks about u always working late."

-Chris: "Luckily for me she's not here, she's back home in Jo'burg."

-Penny: "Really?"

-Chris: "Yeah. Why do u look surprised?"

-Penny: "I'm just surprised that a fine ass man like u would wait for a woman that's not even here."

She moved up to him and sat on his lap. That day she had mustered the courage to do what she always wanted to do. She wanted Chris, and had flirted with him but it seemed as if Chris wasn't noticing her advances. So that day she made sure to make him notice, she was gonna take what she always wanted.

-Chris: "Penny, what are u doing? Please get off me before u embarrass urself. This is a workplace for goodness sake."

But Penny wasn't about to let that moment go. She leaned in and kissed him, just as Sthandiwe was walking in through the open door - ready to surprise her man. But oh boy, she ended up being the one getting the surprise of her life, an unpleasant one.

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She stood there, in the doorway, mouth agape - shocked by the sight of what was in front of her. Chris aggressively pushed Penny off of him. He stood up and looked at Sthandiwe.

-Chris: "Baby, it's not what u think."

-Sthandiwe: "Gosh, how could I be so stupid?"

-Penny: "Oh, is this the lady u've been telling me about? I can't say she's a lady though, I mean who wears jeans and sneakers on a Wednesday?"

-Chris: "Penny, just shut up and leave my office. Now."

Chris said that angrily.

-Sthandiwe: "No. She can stay, I'll leave. I'm sure u've got a lot to talk about, including discussing me. Seeing that u discuss me with ur girlfriends."

She said that already leaving. Penny smiled, to her this was a good thing. In her stupid evil head, Chris fighting with his woman meant she had a chance with him. Chris rushed to the door and ran after Sthandiwe. Sthandiwe was striding down the hallway, hurt, tears streaming down her cheeks. All that was circling in her mind was, "I knew it. I knew that this was gonna happen, it always does. But he lied to me. He promised me that it wouldn't happen. And I stupidly believed him. Why? Why did I change my mind about him? How could I be so stupid?"

She was hating herself for thinking that her relationship with Chris could work. Chris caught up to her. He grabbed her arm, trying to stop her. Sthandiwe was furious.

-Sthandiwe: "Let go off me, Chris."

-Chris: "Baby, let me explain. It's not what u think."

-Sthandiwe: "U're always explaining, Chris. And it hasn't even been a week since u got back here. But u know what, spare me ur explanation now. I don't need it."

She violently shook her arm off of Chris' hand and walked away, leaving Chris standing in the corridor, all eyes on him.

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Sthandiwe stormed out of the Med Centre - Chris' workplace, fuming. All the sound around her was now mute, images went fuzzy. She wasn't seeing or hearing anything around her. She trotted to the gate of the Centre and exited to the road. She didn't even stop to check the traffic, she just crossed. She was just completely out of it. She only came out of that trance when she was already in the middle of the road, vehicles going crazy trying to avoid hitting her, their horns blaring. She came to realise what was going on and quickly ran to the other side of the road and stood in the pavement. Her heart was now beating faster against her chest, realising the disaster she'd almost caused. She faltered as if the floor had just dropped out beneath her. She reached out for a lamp post to steady herself. And stood there for about thirty seconds, trying to catch her breath. When she looked up, she found people staring at her. Embarrassed, she scurried to a nearby coffee shop.

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She got in, got a table and sat down. The waiter came to take her order.

-Waiter: "Can I get u anything, miss?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Water, please."

-Waiter: "With?"

This waiter was just infuriating her even more.

-Sthandiwe: (slamming her hand on the table) "Just give me simple water, man."

The waiter left shaking his head. Sthandiwe sat there, the image of Chris kissing another woman playing in her head. Yes, she had been cheated on before but this was the first time catching her man

redhanded with another woman. She was feeling betrayed, and rage was quickly filling every cell of her body. It's funny how hypocritical people can be. She'd slept with another man just the night before but now she was going insane because she'd just seen Chris being kissed by another woman. Pure hypocrisy right there.

The waiter was taking too long to come back with the damn water. Sthandiwe just sat there staring out at nothing. People around her were talking, laughing, but to her it sounded like they were screaming - just rowdy. Classical music was playing softly in the background, but to her it sounded like it was blaring. Everything was just closing in on her. Until she got dragged back to life by the arrival of the waiter with the glass of water.

-Waiter: "Here's ur water, miss."

-Sthandiwe: "Why don't u drink it urself, fool?"

She got up and rushed out of the café. Where was she going? She had no idea. She didn't know anyone in Cape Town but Chris. However, she continued down the road anyway. Her phone rang. It was Chris. She rejected the call. She went to stand by the entrance of a clothing store. Went online and looked for evening flights to Jo'burg. She found one leaving at 20:15. She booked it. Just as she finished, an SMS beeped in. It was from Alizwa asking if she had gotten the dress. She didn't reply, just went to catch a taxi to the airport. As she sat there waiting for her flight, Chris kept calling but she didn't answer. Alizwa called too, and she did the same thing to him too, she didn't pick up.

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The time came, she boarded her flight. It got to OR Tambo just after 23:00 and she went to get her car. But instead of driving home, she drove straight to Rosebank. To her friend, Palesa (Chris' sister). She drove like a mad person and got there just before midnight. Luckily, the security guard at Palesa's apartment building knew her because she used to visit Palesa. So he let her in without any hassles. She jogged up the stairs to the first floor where Palesa's apartment was. She got there and pounded on her door. After about 5seconds of incessant pounding, Palesa answered.

-Palesa's voice: (from inside) "Who the hell is that, banging on my door at this hour?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's Sthandiwe. Come on, open up."

After about a minute, Palesa came to open, wearing a gown.

-Palesa: "Thandi? Is everything okay?"

Sthandiwe pushed past her and got inside, angry. Palesa locked the door and came to stand in front of Sthandiwe, confused.

-Palesa: "Chomi, talk to me. What's going on?"

Just then, Siyabonga's voice (Palesa's boyfriend) came out of the bedroom.

-Siyabonga: "Baby, is everything okay out there?"

-Palesa: "Yes, baby. Everything is fine. I'll be with u now, now."

That got to Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "U gonna be with him now, now? What about me? What about me, Palesa? Don't I deserve to be with a man that loves me?"

-Palesa: (confused) "What are u talking about, chomi?"

-Sthandiwe: "What am I talking about? Why didn't u tell me that ur brother's a cheating bastard?"

-Palesa: "What? No."

-Sthandiwe: "No what?"

-Palesa: "No, Chris is neither cheating nor a bastard."

-Sthandiwe: "So, I'm lying? Hey, I just saw him with my own two eyes. I was in Cape Town this afternoon."

-Palesa: "No. Not Chris. Chris is not that kind of guy. But even if he was cheating, why get angry at me? It's not like I'm the one who hooked u guys up. I wasn't even there when u guys started dating."

-Sthandiwe: "So what are u trying to say, Palesa?"

-Palesa: "I'm saying, just a few days ago u told me to not involve myself in ur relationship with Chris. U told me to stay out of it. And I complied. Right now, I'm Switzerland. I'm a neutral party."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I am involving u now. U can't be no Switzerland, get off that fence and pick a side."

-Palesa: "Pick a side? Oh? How about u first tell me where u were last night before I do that?"

Sthandiwe's eyes widened. This confrontation was now taking a major turn.

-Palesa: "Yeah. Sihle told me that u slept out. And that u only came back home this morning, looking like u'd pulled an all-nighter, and wearing a man's jacket. So where were u? And whose jacket was it?"

Sthandiwe was now fucked. But she tried to be defensive.

-Sthandiwe: "This isn't about me, Palesa. It's about ur brother cheating on me."

-Palesa: "We aren't stupid, Sthandiwe. Where were u?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. Clearly u've already picked a side, and it's not with me. Me, ur best friend. But u know what? It's okay, I'm done with all of u."

She said that already striding to the door, infuriated. She got out and banged the door behind her.

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She got to her car and drove home. She paced the car, taking corners on two wheels, generally taking city driving to the hilt. She got home and went straight to the bedroom. She kicked off her sneakers, took off her jacket and got under covers with his his jeans and T-shirt still on. She found it hard to fall asleep, still absorbing that afternoon's incident.

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Sthandiwe didn't sleep a wink that night. Chris' "betrayal" had opened up old wounds. She thought about all the men that had played her and broke her heart. She kept thinking, "Why me? Why do I always get a raw deal when it comes to love? Why do I always get my heart broken? Don't I deserve to be happy? Is there something wrong with me?" She just couldn't understand. She was deeply hurt and tears were flooding out her eyes, wetting her pillow. She finally came to a decision that she was gonna leave the dating game and just focus on herself. She was just gonna lock her heart and throw away the key. She told herself that she'd never allow any man in ever again. She wasn't even interested in Chris' explanation, she didn't want to hear it. She was done with him. But still, it hurt like hell. She cried all night until the morning.

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The alarm for her morning jog rang. She sat up on the bed, drunk with fatigue. She didn't feel like getting out of bed at all, she just felt like crawling back under covers and sleep for months. She really did get back under covers and tried to sleep but she couldn't. She stayed wide awake under those covers until the time for her to get up and go to work came. It was a Thursday. She wasn't up for work at all but she got up anyway, rubbed her hands over her face and slowly got out of bed. She dragged herself to the bathroom to take a shower. She got there and went to look at herself in the mirror. Her face was pale, her eyes puffy and blood shot and had bags under them. She was really looking worse for the wear. And she knew that she couldn't go to work and stand in front of her students looking like that. So she went back to the bedroom, took her phone and called Prof Jansen and told him that she won't be able to make it to work because she was having family problems. He was very sympathetic (he had a very soft spot for her) and told her to take both Thursday and Friday off and and only come back to work on Monday, and that he was gonna take her classes. She thanked him and hung up. She went to her contacts and blocked both Chris and Alizwa. She blocked them on Whatsapp as well. Then put on her morning shoes and went to stand in the balcony. There was just something so refreshing about staring out at her green backyard, and that coupled with the fresh morning air lifted up her spirits. She went

back inside the bedroom, made her bed and took off her jeans and T-shirt and got dressed for that jog - she was now feeling up for it. There's just something magical about a morning run, it rejuvenates the body and the mind. And she needed that. She took her iPod, strapped it on her forearm and put the earphones on. Then she went down to the kitchen. She got energy bars and some energy drink and started refuelling her body. Then took out bottled water and went out for her run. She made her round and came back. She was now feeling a little better, and that's what she needed.

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She went to the bathroom and took a shower. She finished and put on a pair of shorts, a vest and flip flops. She got out of the bedroom and went to a closed room at the end of the hallway. She stood in front of it and took a deep breath. The room was a music room that used to be her father's (when he was still alive). Before he became a Chartered Accountant, her father was a pianist and a guitarist. Sthandiwe got her love of music from him. But she wasn't so much into guitar, she only played piano and cello. This room was where she and her dad used to spend most of their time together, writing and playing music. This was their room to bond. She was very close with him but not so much with her mom, who was an always busy neurosurgeon. Sthandiwe hadn't stepped inside this room even once after her father's death - and that was three years earlier. But today she wanted to feel close to him, she needed him. So she took another deep breath, opened the door and stepped inside. This was a very big step for her, a step she needed. She went in and went to the piano, it had now gathered dust. She took a feather duster, dusted it and also dusted the chair. She sat down in front of it and all the memories of her father came rushing back.

-Sthandiwe: "I miss u so much, Daddy. I wish u were u here. I need u. U always knew just what to say to make me feel better."

She exhaled. Then started playing. But she didn't play much, she was getting emotional. Being in this room, playing that piano, was bringing back memories she thought she could handle but she was now failing to. She stopped playing and rested her head on the piano, tears trickling down her cheeks. She doesn't know when but she fell asleep in that position.

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She slept for about 6 hours until she got woken up by the ringing of her cellphone. It was Palesa. She didn't wanna talk to her so she rejected the call and switched off the phone. It was now just after 16:00. She went to the kitchen, got a yoghurt out of the fridge and went to sit in front of the TV. She tried to eat the yoghurt but her appetite was gone. She went to put it back in the fridge and went to the bedroom. She took her laptop and connected it to the Wi-Fi. She went to her emails and opened Xolisa's email. She started going through his research paper as he had asked her to. She wanted to focus on something else and just take her mind off everything. Xolisa's level was above hers but he still valued her opinion. He was a Post-Doctoral Fellow while she had just qualified for her PhD and was gonna be

crowned as a Doctor in that semester (second semester graduation). She made some few changes in his writing style and also made a lot of suggestions. She finished around 22:00 and emailed the edited paper back to Xolisa. She then put the laptop on the nightstand and changed into her pyjamas. She got into bed, played some music on her iPod and put earphones on. She listened to music until she fell asleep.

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The following morning, Friday, she got up just in time for her morning jog. She turned her phone on and found out that she had 5 voice messages but she didn't listen to any of them. She got ready and went running. She came back, got herself ready for work and left. She knew that staying at home again was just gonna drive her nuts. She got to work and went to Prof Jansen's office to tell him that she's in and that she was gonna take her classes that day. Prof was just glad that she had managed to solve her "family problems." She went to her office and there it was, still on the shelf: the box with the dress from Alizwa. She sat down at her desk, logged in on her computer, and opened the University's intranet. She went to the staff directory and looked up Alizwa's office address. She found it and memorised it. She went to her stationery drawer and took out a card. In it she wrote "I also ruined ur shirt so we're even." She put the card in the box and left her office with it, going to Alizwa's office. She was returning the dress, didn't want to keep anything she got from him. In the corridor she met with Xolisa.

-Xolisa: "Hey, are u okay? I was worried when u didn't come in yesterday. I called u on my way home but ur phone was off."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry."

-Xolisa: "That's good. (looking at the box in her hand) So whose birthday is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "No one's."

-Xolisa: "So what's in the box?"

-Sthandiwe: (already leaving) "It's none of ur business, XO."

-Xolisa: "And my paper?"

-Sthandiwe: "Check ur inbox."

She said that already disappearing around the corner, leaving Xolisa standing there smiling to himself. He knew that he had no chance with her but still, he admired her.

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She got to Alizwa's office. It was closed but she was hearing voices inside. She didn't knock, she just put the box down at the door. She exhaled and walked away. Alizwa's chapter in her life was now closed. She went back to her office and her day went on as normal until she went home.

Insert #9

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In Cape Town, Friday afternoon.

Chris was home, he had all his appointments for that day cancelled. He didn't feel like counselling people or helping them with their problems when he also had problems of his own. The woman he loved, Sthandiwe, was still not talking to him. He had tried calling her but realised that she had blocked him. His WhatsApp messages weren't going through either. He had also called his sister, Palesa, asking her to talk to Sthandiwe, to at least give him a chance to explain. But Sthandiwe wasn't taking Palesa's calls either. Chris sat home, not knowing how to reach out to Sthandiwe. A part of him was angry because she was punishing him for something he didn't even do. What was getting to him even more was that she didn't even give him the benefit of the doubt, she just concluded that what she saw was exactly what it looked like. She wasn't even giving him a chance to explain. Clearly, everything he'd said to her when he was in Jo'burg didn't register to her. He had told her how he feels about her, he had made his intentions clear. But she was now acting like she didn't know. To him, she was basically acting like a teenager, not giving them a chance to talk like adults. He slept that night trying to figure out how to reach out to her, to make things right between them. Because he really loved her and didn't want that benign incident to turn into something huge that could destroy their relationship for good.

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The following morning, on a Saturday, Sthandiwe woke up early. It's what she normally does, because her Saturdays are always busy. She woke up at 5am and followed her Saturday routine. Life had to go on. She started with doing her laundry. And when she was taking out the laundry out of the laundry basket, she found the dress with the broken zipper, the one Alizwa broke. She held it to her chest and closed her eyes, reminiscing about that night they spent together. She couldn't deny that it was amazing but it was never gonna happen again. Or at least that's what she was telling herself. She put it inside the machine and continued with her laundry, finished and started cleaning the house. She's always busy during the week so she only gets a chance to do spring cleaning on Saturdays. The house is big, a two-storey house so it'd take her hours to finish cleaning it. But she went on, at least being that busy was helping her get her mind off everything. She finished just after 10am. Then her florist arrived, delivering her flowers. The florist delivers her white lilies every Saturday, for her to take them to her parents' graves. She visits the graves every Saturday of every week. And she's been doing this for the past three years. After the florist had left, she went upstairs to get ready to go visit the cemetery. She took a shower, got dressed and took her cello to the car. She was gonna need it after her visit to the cemetery. She put it in the boot of her car together with the flowers and left.

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She got to the graves and cleaned them as usual, then put the flowers. The graves are side by side, with one big tombstone but separate headstones. Usually, she cleans them, leaves the flowers and goes. But on that day she felt like sitting and talking to them.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, dad. Hey, mom. I know that I don't normally do this but today I feel like talking to you guys. I miss you both and I wish you were here. I wish you were here to tell me what's wrong with me. You named me "Sthandiwe" because you felt that God had LOVED you so much to bless you with me. But I don't feel so much like a blessing to anyone right now."

She turned to her father's headstone.

-Sthandiwe: "Dad, you are the only man that ever appreciated me. The only man that ever saw me as a blessing. Why is that? Why can't I find a man that's gonna appreciate and love me?"

She then turned to her mother's headstone.

-Sthandiwe: "Mom, you found yourself a loving man, your soulmate at the age of 18, you married him, and he made you happy until death did you part. Why can't I have that?"

She started crying.

-Sthandiwe: "Am I expecting too much maybe? Thing is, you raised me up in a very loving home. I used to watch you two, I used to watch how much in love you were with each other. Mom, dad treated you like a queen and I told myself that I want a man like that too. Dad, why can't I find a man like you? Or maybe love doesn't exist anymore? But come on, look at my two best friends, they are happy. Sihle is married to a loving man and Palesa is in a stable relationship, she's in love. But what about me? Why can't I have that? Is there something wrong with me?"

She wiped her tears with both hands.

-Sthandiwe: "Funny, people always say I'm the most beautiful one in that trio. And I'd also like to think I'm the most successful one. Everything else is going well in my life, but why can't I have that one thing? A man that loves me."

Sthandiwe is indeed beautiful. She's got a fair, light complexion; long, rich, black hair; she's tall enough and her body looks like she was sculpted by the world's greatest sculptor. And she is smart. She got 6 distinctions in high school and graduated senior cum laude in all her degrees (Bachelors, Honours and Masters). And she was soon gonna be awarded her PhD degree, at age 27. She's really bright. Started being a Supplemental Instruction Leader to first years when she was doing her second year. Became a tutor when she was doing her third year. Was a Lab Assistant during her Honours and Master's years. Then got the lecturing position when she was doing her first year in PhD. Everything was really going well for her except in the love department. She was failing dismally in that one.

-Sthandiwe: "You know, dad, I'm 27 now but I don't even know how it feels like to dump a guy. I always get cheated on and when I make a stink about it they apologise by dumping me. And the longest relationship I ever had in my life lasted only 7 months. For sure that's not normal. So tell me, mom and dad, what is wrong with me? Why can't I keep a man? I tell you, if I got a rand everytime I shed a tear for a guy I'd be owning a house in Sandton now. Why? Why is this happening to me?"

She stopped, swallowed. Really feeling the pain. Tears continued flowing down her cheeks.

-Sthandiwe: "I do love Chris. I really do. But he's just like all of them. He's disappointed me too. He's been contacting me wanting to talk. But I won't give him that chance. I want to be the one who leaves first this time. I can't hold on to him, I won't let my heart break more than it already is."

She sat there, crying, until she realised that she was running out of time. She wiped her tears, went back to her car and drove off. She was going to Soweto. She volunteers at a House for children with cancer in Diepkloof every Saturday.

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She got there just after 14:00. She helped around as usual. Then went to sit with the kids and read them stories about hope. It's what she normally does, giving them hope to fight the disease. She enjoys spending time with the kids and they love her too. But they love it more when she plays them the cello. So she went to get it from her car and played it to them, as she normally does. She had so much fun. That day, spending time with them felt like a therapy to her. She was in the zone, completely forgotten about her problems. She spent hours there and left after 18:00 and drove home.

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She got home and it was late. The yard of her house is incomplete in the front, as in, by design the driveway extends right out to the street, there's no car gate, but there is a small gate for people. She drove up the driveway and drove inside the garage to park her car. She got out and made her way to the front door. But when she got there, she was surprised to find a white card seated on red rose petals scattered all over the front porch.

-Sthandiwe: "What the hell?"

She bent over and took the card. It read, "Please put on that beautiful smile of urs before u walk in."

-Sthandiwe: "Who the hell...?"

Insert #10

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Sthandiwe just stood there, and for a few seconds she was confused, unsure of what was going on. She then rushed to check under that tile if her spare key was still there. It was gone. After Sihle had used it that day she put it back there and in the days that followed Sthandiwe got too occupied to take it back. So when she found it gone she was sure that her friends and Chris had plotted that together. And she wasn't pleased at all.

-Sthandiwe: "U really are pissing me off now, Christopher Motaung."

She was mad because he had let himself into her house without her permission. To her that was invasion of privacy, and she didn't like it.

Since there's no gate, if someone walks up the driveway they get to the front porch easily. And Sthandiwe seldom locks the security gate to the porch, so if u have the front door key (or know where she hides it) u can simply walk right in. And that's exactly what had happened that day.

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She opened the unlocked door and walked inside, pissed. The ceiling light wasn't lit, only the wall lights were, giving out that dim light. The path of rose petals continued inside, bordered with a line of white tea-light candles on each side. And there was another card on the floor. She picked it up and it read, "Please don't be mad." A smile found itself to her face.

-Sthandiwe: (sotto voce) "Clearly, Chris, u watch too much romcoms and then act as if u don't. Funny."

The house is open plan: living room and dining room, but if u walk through the front door u have to turn a corner before u can see the dining room. The rose petal path was leading to that dining room.

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She followed it, and all that anger was now subsiding. She got to the dining room. The table was beautifully set, for two. Only candles were lit, giving the room that warm romantic ambiance. She chuckled and looked to her left. There he was. Alizwa, standing to the side handsomely smiling.

-Alizwa: "Please don't be mad at him."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "Alizwa? What the hell?"

-Alizwa: "Were u expecting someone else?"

Sthandiwe wouldn't answer that.

-Sthandiwe: "How did u get in here? And who is the 'him' I shouldn't be mad at?"

-Alizwa: "I was there when u hid the key for ur friend the other day, remember? And the 'him' is Xolisa, ur colleague slash friend or whatever."

-Sthandiwe: "Xolisa? How does he feature in all this?"

-Alizwa: "I meant to return the dress to ur office immediately after I found the box at my office door yesterday. But I got busy so I only managed to get to ur office after 16:30. And I couldn't find u, u had already left. But I got to meet Xolisa."

-Sthandiwe: "U know Xolisa?"

-Alizwa: "Not before yesterday, I didn't."

-Sthandiwe: "And?"

-Alizwa: "And he talks a lot. He's just too nosy. He started asking me a lotta questions about what was inside that box. He's just too forward. But his yapping worked to my advantage. He ended up giving me this idea, unwittingly."

-Sthandiwe: "Are u gonna tell me what's going on or u want me to slap it out of u?"

-Alizwa: "He wanted to keep the box saying he'd give it to u on Monday. But I'm sure he just wanted to peek inside, so I had to come up with something. I told him that it had to get to u before the end of the weekend and that it'd already be late on Monday. That's when he said I better run to ur house that minute because if I were to wait until today I wouldn't find u. He said u're always out on Saturdays and u only come back late. Apparently, u visit the cemetery then go do some charity work. So I saw that as an opportunity to come in here today and do something nice for u, when u're not in. As a surprise. So yeah, here I am."

-Sthandiwe: "Something nice? Are u kidding me right now? U call invading my privacy 'something nice'? Are u outta ur mind?"

-Alizwa: (camlly) "I knew that u were gonna be mad, understandably so. But that's the chance I was willing to take. On my way here, I was praying to find that key still under that tile and God answered my prayers."

-Sthandiwe: "God? God had nothing to do with this. This is my house, Alizwa, and I want u out. Now."

She said that pointing to the direction of the front door. But Alizwa wasn't gonna leave until his mission was accomplished. He moved up to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

-Alizwa: (gently) "I'm sorry, okay? But u were drifting away and I had to do something. Look, maybe we started this whole thing...us...the wrong way. And I think that's why u freaked out and decided to take a step back. Spending the night together changed everything, u weren't returning my calls and before I knew it my calls were blocked. I had to do something to show u how much this (pointing to her then to himself) means to me. It's more than just exchanging body fluids. So, I'd like us to start over again. But take it slow this time, no pressure."

He stopped and looked straight into her eyes as if seeking entrance to her soul. They stared at each other like that for a moment, until Sthandiwe slowly removed his hands off of her.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't touch me. Keep ur hands to urself and leave my house."

Alizwa lifted his hands up and took a step back.

-Alizwa: "Okay, I won't touch u again. But please just listen. I'm not gonna use words than are gonna freak u out at this point but I'm gonna say this: I really, really want to be in ur life, Thandi. Please give me a chance."

Sthandiwe kept quiet for a moment, letting those words sink. She had made a promise to herself that she wasn't gonna see him again, that she had closed that chapter, but her heart was now betraying her, slowly but surely. And that was freaking her out.

-Sthandiwe: "Please, Alizwa, just go. I don't need this right now."

-Alizwa: "Okay, I'll leave and I'll never bother u again. But please...let's just get through dinner. I...I've cooked some...something for u."

He was now talking nervously, looking down, fiddling with his hands. And when he looked up, he found Sthandiwe staring at him, not moving. He got even more nervous. And he let out a nervous smile. He wanted her to say something, anything. But what came out of her mouth next, he didn't see it coming. It was just weird.

-Sthandiwe: "Do u have dentures?"

-Alizwa: "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "Ur teeth. They are super white and they are all of the same size. Are they dentures?"

Alizwa chuckled.

-Alizwa: "Okay, I didn't see all of that coming. But to answer ur question. No. These teeth are what God gave me, I don't have a single denture in my mouth."

Sthandiwe was seeing how nervous he was, she was kind of feeling sorry for him. She'd never thought she'd ever see him that nervous, and kind of showing his vulnerable side. So she asked him that question because he wanted to make him laugh and relax a bit. She was cutting him some slack. And seeing him that vulnerable was softening her heart. She then laughed, and Alizwa ended up laughing as well. Then he moved up to her and hugged her. Sthandiwe hesitated but finally, her arms moved to surround him. She buried herself in his chest. Alizwa buried his face in her hair. It was a long hug. She didn't believe that she was doing that but she sure as hell didn't want to let him go. It didn't only feel good, it felt right. She was losing herself in his arms. Yeah, that's the kind of effect he had on her. But she finally stepped back.

-Sthandiwe: "U said u cooked?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: "Mhh! A man that cooks. Impressive."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "I hope u're hungry."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm starved. I haven't eaten anything today."

-Alizwa: "Good then, come sit. I've made Pan-Seared Scallops on Linguine. I hope u like it."

-Sthandiwe: "My favorite. If I didn't know any better I'd think u are psychic."

-Alizwa: "Really, it's ur favourite? Well, I guess I got lucky then. Lucky guess."

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They went to the table. Alizwa pulled out a chair for her and she sat down.

-Alizwa: "Okay, let me go get the food from the kitchen."

He left. Sthandiwe just smiled and shook her head. In no time, Alizwa came back with the food and started plating for them.

-Sthandiwe: "I see u've made urself comfortable in my house."

-Alizwa: "I said it on that first day, that I like ur house and I could get used to it. Remember?"

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "No, I don't remember. I was lost in ur eyes to remember anything."

-Alizwa: "U were? Really?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course not. And of course, I remember u saying that."

Alizwa laughed. He finished plating and sat down opposite her.

-Alizwa: "Okay, u can dig in now."

She dug in but Alizwa wasn't eating, anxious to hear what she had to say about his cooking. After her first bite, he asked.

-Alizwa: "How is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Are u kidding me? It's the best I've ever tasted."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "I'm glad u like it."

They ate, chatting, laughing. Until they finished. Sthandiwe was having a good time. Despite everything she'd said earlier, she really liked having Alizwa there.

-Alizwa: "Okay, there's one more thing I want u to see."

-Sthandiwe: "What is it?"

-Alizwa: "Come with me and see for urself."

He got up and took her hand, and they got out of the back sliding door to the backyard.

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He led her to the gazebo. It was decorated with small paper lanterns. A larger one laid on its side on the table.

-Sthandiwe: "What is this?"

Alizwa took out a lighter, went to the lantern and used the lighter to light underneath the lantern.

-Alizwa: "It's a wish lantern. The Chinese float them into the sky to grant them wishes...(gesturing) Here, hold this side."

He continued lighting it as Sthandiwe gripped onto it.

-Sthandiwe: "But, isn't it illegal to release it in my backyard?"

-Alizwa: "No, relax, don't worry about a thing. Now as soon as we let it go, think of a wish. On the count of three... One...two...three."

They released it and it drifted up into the air. Sthandiwe's inside wish was, "God, please let this be real this time."

Alizwa found her hand and slipped his into it. He came around and whispered in her ear.

-Alizwa: "All I wish for is to get ur heart."

He kissed her neck. She turned to him and kissed him on the lips. Her tongue hungrily found his, the kiss got fast and heated. Her hands moved up to the buttons of his shirt, ready to tear his shirt off. But Alizwa pulled back and grabbed both her hands.

-Alizwa: (softly) "No pressure. Remember? Tonight, I just want us to spend quality time together and get to know each other better."

Sthandiwe smiled. This guy was slowly melting her heart. Alizwa took her hand and they went to lie down on the lounge. They laid down side by side and Alizwa put her head on his chest and hugged her tight.

-Alizwa: "If we could remain like this forever, I'd be a happy man. (then) Now, u can ask me anything u want to know about me."

They laid like that, talking, getting to know each other, until it got colder.

-Sthandiwe: "Let's go inside. It's getting cold out here."

They got up and started walking back to the house hand in hand.

-Sthandiwe: "So how did u get here? Where's ur car?"

-Alizwa: "I called my friend to come and take it. I didn't want u to see it upon ur arrival. It would have ruined the surprise."

-Sthandiwe: "So much trouble though."

-Alizwa: "Anything for u."

Sthandiwe smiled and they walked inside.

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Meanwhile in Cape Town. Chris was at his dimly lit apartment, sitting in the lounge, reading some work documents on his laptop. He had decided to fly to Jo'burg to see Sthandiwe that day but something came up at work and he had to postpone his trip to the following day (Sunday). He was busy reading when he heard the knock at the door. He ignored it, he wasn't expecting anyone and he was definitely not in the mood to talk. But the knock persisted until he got up and went to open the door. And at the door he found Penny. An unpleasant surprise. She was wearing a red trenchcoat and black stilettos.

-Chris: "What are u doing here, Penny?"

-Penny: "Hey, aren't u gonna invite me in?"

She said that already pushing her way inside.

-Chris: "Penny, u better leave my house now if u still value ur job."

But Penny came closer. And whispered in his ear.

-Penny: "I want u. Now. Touch me."

-Chris: "Just get the hell out of my house, woman."

But Penny yanked off the belt of her trenchcoat. The coat opened, revealing her nakedness. She was wearing nothing underneath. She dropped the coat to the floor. Chris' eyes took in her sexy, exquisite body.

-Penny: "U were saying?"

Chris' reserve was now breaking like a cracked dam. He came closer to her.

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Chris came closer to Penny, then bent over, picked up the coat and handed it to her.

-Chris: "Put that back on and leave my house this moment."

Penny quickly put on the coat, but still finding it hard to believe that he'd just rejected her.

-Penny: "U're rejecting me? Me? U know how many men would kill to have me?"

-Chris: "Then go to them."

He said that already pushing her out the door. Then slammed his door shut and locked it.

-Penny: (shouting from outside) "U are a jerk, Chris. Fuck u!"

-Chris: (under his breath) "And u are a bitch."

He went back to sit on the couch, pissed.

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The following morning. Sthandiwe was fast asleep and Alizwa was right next to her, awake. He watched her sleeping, strands of hair across her eyes. He gently brushed the hair out of her eyes and studied her. Her face looked so innocent, he shook his head and sighed as if feeling sorry for her. He then quietly sneaked out of bed and walked out of the bedroom, taking his phone with him. Still wearing a vest and boxers. He walked down the stairs and out the back sliding door to the back patio. He went to lean against the rail and scrolled down on his phone until he found "WIFEY". He dialled. His wife, Reneé, picked up on the other side.

-Reneé: " Hey u."

-Alizwa: "Morning, beautiful. Sorry I didn't send u a goodnight message last night. Did u sleep well?"

-Reneé: "Yeah. Don't worry about me, worry about what u doing over there. How's it coming along?"

-Alizwa: "U needn't worry urself about that, it's coming along just fine. I know how to handle women. And ur recipe worked like a charm."

-Reneé: "I figured as much when u didn't come home last night. But please, don't lose sight of what we're trying to accomplish here. Keep ur eye on the prize."

-Alizwa: "Of course. Look, I gotta go. See u later."

-Reneé: "Okay, later then."

-Alizwa: "I love u."

-Reneé: "I love u too."

He hung up and walked back inside.

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As he got in, Sthandiwe was walking down the stairs, wearing a gown.

-Alizwa: (smiling) "Good morning, sleepy head. Sleep well?"

-Sthandiwe: "I slept like a baby, for a change."

-Alizwa: "For a change?"

But she didn't wanna go there.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry about it."

He walked up to her and gave her a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

-Alizwa: "Come, let's go back upstairs and I'll run u a bubble bath. So u can relax while I make u breakfast."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "A bath? I don't remember the last time I had a bubble bath, u know. I'm always in a hurry so I only use the shower."

-Alizwa: "Well then, consider this ur lucky day."

They got to the bathroom and went to brush their teeth together. Alizwa rinsed his face then ran the bubble bath for her. Left her to soak and went back to the bedroom to put on some clothes. Then went to the kitchen to make breakfast. Sthandiwe sat in that bath, with her eyes closed, wondering if she was doing the right thing by letting Alizwa in. What about the vow she'd made to herself, that she'd take a break from men and just focus on herself? Was Alizwa not gonna break her heart too? But this thing with Alizwa felt right, so she just brushed her doubts aside and chose to just enjoy it and worry later. The person she didn't wanna see again was Chris. She hated him for breaking the promises he'd made to her, she hated him for breaking her heart. But she was ready to forget about him and just move on with her life.

She finished taking the bath, lotioned herself and put on torn denim shorts, a vest, and morning shoes. Then went down to the kitchen.

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She found English breakfast ready on the breakfast table. Alizwa was at the fridge taking out some juice.

-Sthandiwe: "Mmh! That looks scrumptious."

She went to sit down.

Alizwa: "Let ur taste buds be the judge."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure my kitchen's surprised hey. I do buy groceries but I only cook once or twice a month. My friends use this kitchen more than I do and they don't even live here."

Alizwa sat down next to her and poured juice in their glasses.

-Alizwa: "Ur friends?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Sihle and Palesa."

-Alizwa: "U're close?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. We all met in varsity six years ago, through our love of music. I was doing my honours and they were both doing third year. We became very close, always together on campus, and we were even dubbed the 'Tight Three.' But right now...we aren't that tight. We are... going through something."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "Going through something? U talking as if it's a marriage or a romantic relationship."

Sthandiwe laughed, waved him off and started eating.

-Sthandiwe: "Mmh! This tastes good as it looks. U really are a good cook."

-Alizwa: "I learned to cook at a young age, living in the Eastern Cape. My mom died when I was eleven. My dad never remarried and I was the only child so I had to learn to do everything for myself."

-Sthandiwe: "Only child? But I thought u said u live with ur sister?"

-Alizwa: (busted) "She's ummh...she's my half-sister. We only share a father. And I only got to meet her for the first time two years ago at my father's funeral."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know that ur father's also late. U didn't tell me that."

-Alizwa: "It's not something I like talking about."

Sthandiwe sighed.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I completely understand. I don't like talking about my parents either."

-Alizwa: "U said they passed away three years ago, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I became an orphan in just a single day. My dad was a traditional man, so he had gone with my mom to visit his grandparents' graves in Eastern Cape. But unfortunately they didn't make it back. When the car accident happened, they were still on the Eastern Cape soil. It happened in Alwal North, on their way back."

-Alizwa: "I'm so sorry to hear that."

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay. Moving right along... where exactly in the Eastern Cape are u from?"

-Alizwa: "Queenstown. U?"

-Sthandiwe: "Grahamstown. But I was born and raised here. My paternal grandparents moved here when my dad was still a boy."

-Alizwa: "Do u at least visit there?"

-Sthandiwe: "I've only been to Grahamstown once. I visited when I was 15."

-Alizwa: "Yoh. Well, unlike u, I visit EC every now and then. My entire family, extended family, is there. Queenstown will always be my home."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Now u making it sound like I'm a lost soul with no roots."

-Alizwa: (joking) "Aren't u?"

They both laughed and continued eating their breakfast. They finished and did the dishes together. Then Alizwa went upstairs to take a bath.

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After that they went to sit outside, in the back patio. Sthandiwe rested her head on Alizwa's lap. And they talked about this and that, Alizwa brushing her hair, until she fell asleep. She got woken up by the ringing of her cellphone. It was now after 13:00. She sat up and answered.

-Sthandiwe: Hello...(beat)...What? Tomorrow?... (be

at)...But that's too short notice, Tim...(beat)...

Okay, I'll see. But if I can't make it I'll give u my proxy...(beat)...Okay, bye."

She hung up.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Nah, I have a very busy day tomorrow. I don't think I'll make it."

Alizwa looked at her.

-Alizwa: "And then?"

Sthandiwe kept quiet for a moment, pondering if she should tell him. She finally decided to tell him.

-Sthandiwe: "U're too nosy though. That was Tim. He was telling me that the board meeting that was supposed to be on Friday has now been moved up to tomorrow. That's too short notice."

-Alizwa: "Board meeting?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. When my father was still alive, he had a big accounting firm based in Sandton. And now that he's gone I own 55% of that company. But I'm not involved in its day to day running. I only attend board meetings. Tim's the CEO. And he was like a son to my father."

But she was telling the story to someone who seemed like he already knew it.

-Alizwa: "Mmh. U are a daughter of privilege then."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess so. But sometimes I wish I wasn't. To be honest, I'm not into all that. I like to keep things simple, live a simple life. For example, we have another house in Hyde Park but I seldom use it. I'm now even considering selling it. I mean, paying taxes and rates for a house I don't even use is just insane. Even when my folks were still around we used this one more. My mom wanted to be closer to the hospital that she was working in, my dad wanted to be closer to her and it also worked for me too

because it's close to varsity. But now it's no longer about it being close to varsity, I like it because it's more humble. And humble is the word that defines me. I don't like..."

She didn't finish. She got disturbed by the ringing of the doorbell.

-Sthandiwe: "Is that the doorbell?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah. Expecting someone?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. But let me go see who it is."

She got up and went inside, leaving Alizwa there.

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She went to open the front door and found Chris standing on her doorstep. And the images of what she saw in his office in Cape Town came rushing back in her head, making her angry.

-Sthandiwe: "Christopher? What are u doing here?"

Chris walked inside. Sthandiwe stood there, holding the door open.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, please don't say anything, just hear me out."

Sthandiwe was trying so hard to control her anger. She spoke slowly.

-Sthandiwe: "Christopher, I don't. Want. To hear. Anything. From u. Just leave."

-Chris: "Thandi, u got it all wrong. I love u, only u. The woman u found in my office is nothing but my assistant. She'd been flirting with me since she came to work for me but I never gave her any attention. And on that day, she just waltzed into my office and threw herself onto me. She just came and sat on my lap. And before I knew it, her lips were on mine. And that's when u walked in."

Everything he was saying was all lies to Sthandiwe. And the only thing he'd managed to accomplish was to make her even more angry.

-Sthandiwe: "Do u see a stupid every time u look at me, Christopher? If u saw a reason to come here and tell a lie, couldn't u at least come up with a better story? What u're telling me right now is nothing but bullshit lies right from the corners of hell, and u know it too. U have a nerve coming to my house to tell me this crap."

-Chris: "It's not lies, Thandi. It's the honest truth."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I don't care. Just go back to ur girlfriend and feed her ur damn lies. Maybe she buys them, I don't."

-Chris: "I'm not lying to u, sthandwa sam. I never lied. I love u, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "Love? Don't even go there, Chris. I'm the one who loved u. But what did u do? U just saw me as a stupid fool that u can toy with."

Tears were now running down her cheeks. Reliving that pain.

-Sthandiwe: "U made me stupid promises that u knew u wouldn't keep. U lifted me high up and then dropped me to the ground. Do u know how much that hurts? U hurt me, Chris. U hurt me?"

She was now crying uncontrollable. Chris came closer and held her hands.

-Chris: "I didn't lie to u, sthandwa sam. I meant everything I said to u. And I didn't do anything to hurt u. Look, I know that u've been hurt a lot before. I know that u've been lied to. And that is making it hard for u to trust men. But I need u to trust me. I love u, Thandi. I really do. And I'd never hurt u. I promise."

Sthandiwe slowly removed her hands off of Chris'. What he'd just said about her being hurt so much before hit her right at the core. She was now not angry but hurt.

-Sthandiwe: "Wow, I can't believe u just did that. I can't believe u just psychoanalysed me. I'm not one of ur patients, Christopher."

-Chris: "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have put it that way. I--"

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "Just get out."

Chris didn't move. And that angered Sthandiwe even more.

-Sthandiwe: (screaming) "Now, Christopher. Get out."

Alizwa heard the screaming and came in running.

-Alizwa: "Baby, is everything okay here?"

Chris looked at Alizwa and then to Sthandiwe.

-Chris: "Baby? Thandi, who's this?"

-Alizwa: "Is there a problem here?"

Sthandiwe wiped her tears with both hands.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, just go and never come back here. Go back to ur girlfriend. Move on with ur life, I have."

Chris was in a state of shock, not believing what he was hearing and seeing. He couldn't believe that Sthandiwe had moved on that quickly. It took him a moment to let it sink. He was just hurt. And her last words had cut deep. He opened his mouth to say something but no words came out. He stood there like he was in a mine field, unable to move. His face showed his losing battle against his emotions. He looked down, trying to stay composed. But it didn't work. Tears trickled down his cheeks. He turned and walked out without saying a word. Sthandiwe shut the door and went to bury herself in Alizwa's chest. Alizwa just hugged her, not wanting to ask what was going on. Actually, it was pretty obvious.

-Alizwa: "I was just about to leave. It's back to work tomorrow and I wanna prepare. Are u gonna be okay by urself?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay, u can go. Actually, I think being alone will do me good right now."

-Alizwa: "Are u sure?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Go."

-Alizwa: "Okay then. I'll see u tomorrow."

He kissed her goodbye and left. Sthandiwe went straight to the bedroom and curled up on the bed. She'd thought she was getting over what Chris had done to her and that she was ready to put it behind her but seeing him again just stirred up all that anger inside of her.

Insert #12

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That afternoon, Alizwa got to his mansion in Upper Houghton. He lied to Sthandiwe, telling her that he lives in Rosebank with his sister but he was actually living in Houghton with his wife, Reneé.

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He entered through the front door of his luxurious abode. Reneé, who's white and also 35 years old just like Alizwa, was in the main room, in a wheelchair, holding a framed photo. As soon as she heard the front door open she put the photo on her lap, facing down. Alizwa walked up to her.

-Alizwa: "Hey, beautiful."

He bent over, and leaned in for a kiss. But she turned away.

-Reneé: "Not with that mouth. I don't want to taste her on u."

-Alizwa: "Please tell me u're kidding right now."

-Reneé: "So how was it?"

-Alizwa: "How was what?"

-Reneé: "The sex. Did u fuck her?"

-Alizwa: "Oh come on, Reneé. Really? I'm gonna have to answer such questions now?"

-Reneé: "Yes, u're gonna have to answer, Al. I'm the one who put u up to this so I want transparency."

Alizwa sighed and went to kneel before her. He held her hands and looked deep into her eyes.

-Alizwa: "Baby, do u still want me to continue doing this? Because if u dont, all u need to do is to just say the word and I'll pull the plug."

-Reneé: "It's necessary, Al."

-Alizwa: "Then let me do it my way and refrain from asking me such questions."

-Reneé: "Are u falling for this girl?"

-Alizwa: "Don't be ridiculous."

-Reneé: "Then answer the question. Did u fuck her?"

-Alizwa: "No, Reneé. I didn't sleep with her last night."

-Reneé: "Meaning u have slept with her in other nights and didn't tell me?"

-Alizwa: "That's not what I meant. It was just a wrong choice of words on my part. What I meant is: I haven't slept with her yet."

He was lying. Yes, he didn't sleep with her the night before but what about the night at the hotel? The hotel room he paid for using cash not a card. Why was he hiding that from his wife?

-Reneé: "Don't forget why we're doing this, Al?"

She took the photo on her lap and held it up for Alizwa to see.

-Alizwa: (looking away) "Don't make me look at that."

-Reneé: "I need to remind u why we're doing this. (shouting) Look at it, Al. Look at it."

In the photo was Reneé STANDING with Alizwa, holding their 3 year old boy. Alizwa just glanced at the photo then took it from her hand and put it back on her lap, facing down again.

-Reneé: "That's what we lost, Al. We lost our son, we can't have another baby again and I'm stuck on this wheelchair all because of her father who decided to jump red robots 3 years ago."

-Alizwa: "I know what happened, I was there. U don't have to remind me."

-Reneé: "Then do what u have to do for us to get what we deserve."

-Alizwa: "Do I really have to sleep with her though?"

-Reneé: "Are u kidding me right now? We've been planning this for a while, Al. U know what u have to do. How else are u gonna get close to her if u don't fuck her? How else are u gonna earn her trust? Just do this so we can get that company and move on with our lives. It's not personal, it's just just business."

-Alizwa: "She's gonna get hurt when she finds out what I was after all this time. And she's innocent in all of this, you know."

-Reneé: "Al, don't go all soft on me now. Don't grow conscience on me. Nobody's innocent. And I didn't get to where I am today by playing nice. I didn't become a successful businesswoman by listening to my conscience. I always do what's necessary for business and keep my feelings out of it."

Alizwa stood up.

-Alizwa: "Fine. Let's continue with the plan."

-Reneé: "The company we are gonna take belongs to the man that took so much from us, her father. We are only taking what's owed to us. We aren't doing anything to the girl. And as for the sex. Well, it's not like u're gonna rape her, it's gonna be consensual. So, I don't see what the problem is."

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After Chris left Sthandiwe's house he went straight home in Melrose. He knew that his parents were away for the weekend and he was gonna be home alone. And that's exactly what he needed, being alone. He got home and booked a flight online, a flight for that evening. Then he went to sit in front of a tv, wanting to just watch and unwind. But the remote of the decoder had no batteries. He was looking for new batteries when Palesa arrived. He got irked immediately because he knew that she was gonna ask questions and he was in no mood to talk. He tried to hide the fact that he wasn't okay but she could see right through him. And she pestered him until he told her the whole story. She got furious.

-Palesa: "How could she? How dare she do that to my brother?"

Chris was now sitting on the couch, taking new batteries out of a pack to put them in the remote.

-Chris: "She's broken, Lisa. Her exes really did a number on her that's why she's like this. It's not her fault."

-Palesa: (angry) "Seriously, Chris? Do u have to be a shrink all the time?"

-Chris: "Just let it go, Lisa. I'm gonna be fine."

-Palesa: "Let it go? No. She's a bitch and she needs..."

She didn't finish. Chris interrupted her.

-Chris: (angry) "Palesa!"

-Palesa: "What?"

-Chris: "Don't ever call her that again. Hear me?"

-Palesa: "No, Chris. U are the one who needs to hear me. Sthandiwe needs to be put in line. She's..."

-Chris: (finishing her sentence) "...ur friend. She's ur friend. And she needs ur support."

He said that fiddling with the batteries trying to put them in the remote. It was a battle, until they got in. But he had put them the other way, his mind preoccupied. He tried to turn on the decoder but it wouldn't. He kept hitting and hitting the buttons but still. He hit the remote on his forehead and tried it again but still. He took the batteries out and fiddled with them again, trying to change them. All this time, Palesa was just quiet, staring at him, feeling sorry for him, hurt. Until:

-Palesa: "Chris."

Chris continued trying to put the batteries in. Seemed like he wasn't even hearing Palesa.

-Palesa: "Chris!"

Chris stopped, looked at his hands shaking. Suddenly realising what he was doing. Absurd. Pathetic. Pitiful. He put the remote and the batteries aside and slowly turned to Palesa. Palesa reached up to him and hugged him with her caring arms. The hug lingered. Until:

-Chris: "I need to get outta this place. I don't want to be here anymore. Are u gonna take me to the airport?"

-Palesa: "Of course."

She looked at her broken brother. She knew she had to do something.

She drove him to the airport, and when his flight time came, he boarded and left for Cape Town, maybe for good.

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The following morning, Sthandiwe, woke up and went for a jog as she normally does on weekdays. Came back and went to take a shower. As she took out clothes to wear from the closet she noticed Alizwa's jacket in a hanger, the jacket she wore that morning from the hotel. She took it out and to her face, breathing it in, Alizwa's cologne. A smile formed on her face. She was slowly falling for this guy.

She put the jacket back in the closet then got dressed and left for work.

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She got to her office and called Tim to tell him that she would not make it to the meeting, and that they should video-call her when it's time. Tim agreed. Then she went to conduct her first lecture of the day. After the lecture she went back to her office, she got there just a minute before the video-call from the boardroom came through. The board was gonna be voting for its new Chairman. The voting commenced and got concluded. After she ended the call, she had to go to another lecture. She conducted all her lectures for the day and went back to her office. She had to set a test paper for her students, that they were gonna write on the Wednesday of that week. She had just started with the paper when she heard a knock at the door. She answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Come in."

Palesa walked in, looking like a woman on a mission. Sthandiwe's eyes widened and she stood up. She knew what Palesa's visit was about.

-Sthandiwe: "Lisa?"

-Palesa: "Don't u dare 'Lisa' me. How could u do something like that to Chris, Sthandiwe? Chris has been nothing but a good man to u. He loved u, dammit."

-Sthandiwe: "Please, Lisa, let's not do this here. This is my place of work. Please, let's talk about this later."

-Palesa: "What a two-faced bitch u are. Just the other day u were banging on my door at midnight angry saying Chris was cheating on u whereas u're the one who's spreading legs for another man."

-Sthandiwe: "Palesa, please."

-Palesa: "Listen here, Sthandiwe. U can't hurt my brother like that and then expect our friendship to continue as if nothing's happened."

-Sthandiwe: "Meaning?"

-Palesa: "U've just lost a friend in me."

She said that already opening the door.

-Sthandiwe: "Palesa, wait."

Palesa walked out and banged the door behind her. Sthandiwe sat down on her chair and buried her face in her hands.

Insert #13

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Sthandiwe remained in that position, thinking. All that was going through her mind was "Was I really wrong about Chris? Did I overreact? If I did then I'm now losing my bestfriend for nothing. What am I doing? Why did I...?"

She got disturbed by a knock at the door. But she ignored it. The door opened and Xolisa walked in. Sthandiwe just looked at him then looked down again. She was just in a dull mood. And Xolisa noticed.

-Xolisa: "Doctor B, are u okay?"

That's what he used to call her when he wanted her to smile. But this time she didn't.

-Sthandiwe: (annoyed) "What do u want, Xolisa?"

-Xolisa: "Ummh...I wanted to thank u for helping me with my paper."

-Sthandiwe: "U already thanked me, Xolisa. I got ur message on Saturday."

-Xolisa: "Ri-i-i-ght. I did."

But he still stood there, not leaving.

-Sthandiwe: (looking at him, irritated) "Is there something else?"

-Xolisa: "Oh, yeah. That mystery box u had on Friday, some guy came back with it after u left. I asked him to take it to ur house. Did u get it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I got it."

-Xolisa: "What was in it?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's no business of urs."

-Xolisa: "I think I know that guy, u know. I've seen him somewhere before. But I just can't recall where exactly."

-Sthandiwe: "What guy?"

-Xolisa: "The guy that came with the box."

-Sthandiwe: "There's nothing surprising there. The guy works here, Xolisa. Sure u've seen him around campus."

-Xolisa: "No. Not here. I've seen him somewhere else. I just don't know where."

Sthandiwe had had it with this stupid conversation that was going nowhere.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, Xolisa. Could u please close the door behind u now?"

-Xolisa: "Is that u kicking me out?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just go, please."

Xolisa didn't say anything, he just walked out shaking his head.

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That afternoon, Sthandiwe got home and entered through the front door, dragging herself. She was just down. She went to snag in the couch.

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe I should have listened to Chris' explanation. Maybe he was telling the truth. Palesa wouldn't be that angry at me if he was lying."

She took out her phone from her handbag and decided to call Chris to apologise. She dialled but Chris' phone just rang unanswered. She dialled again, and this time Chris answered.

-Chris: "Yes."

She heard the agitation in his voice and her heart just sank. She didn't know what to say or where to begin.

-Sthandiwe: "I...Please, don't hang up."

-Chris: "What do u want, Sthandiwe?"

-Sthandiwe: "I... I want to apologise. Chris, u were right. I'm messed up. I'm so fucking messed up that I don't even know what I'm doing anymore. I am scared and insecure. I'm scared of heartbreak that I ended up pushing u away. I pushed u away for something u didn't even do. Chris, now I want to tell u that I believe u. I believe that u didn't cheat on me. I believe everything u said to me."

-Chris: "Why are u telling me this, Sthandiwe?"

-Sthandiwe: "I hope I'm not too late to say that I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't believe u. I'm sorry that I hurt u when all u wanted was to love me."

-Chris: "Well, I'm sorry too."

-Sthandiwe: (hopeful) "Yeah?"

-Chris: "Yeah. I'm sorry but I don't need ur sorries, Sthandiwe. Please don't call this number again."

The line went dead. But Sthandiwe still held the phone to her ear, and remained like that for a moment too long, like a statue, her mouth agape. She couldn't believe that he'd just hung up on her. But she knew that she deserved it. Tears escaped her eyes. She dragged herself to the bedroom. Changed into her PJs and got into bed, even though it was still early. It was around 17:30.

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DREAM SEQUENCE

Sthandiwe was running in the deep, deep darkness, in the woods. She was running picking up the pace. Her heart pounding faster than her feet. She looked back, tripped and fell over a lifeless body. She checked it. It was hers, her own body, with a knife stuck in her back. She freaked out, panting.

-Disembodied voice: "Sthandwa sam, run. You are in danger"

Again...

"You are in danger"

The voice echoed...as...

Sthandiwe bolted upright in bed. Her eyes sprung open.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris!"

She looked around her, it took her a second to realise that she was just having a nightmare. She was still laying in her bed. Her heart was pounding. Sweat covering her body. Sheets tangled around her legs.

Morning light pouring in through the slats of her blinds and the alarm for her morning jog was ringing relentlessly from her phone on the nightstand. She rolled over and turned it off. Even though she couldn't quite make who the voice in the dream belonged to, she thought it was Chris' because he's the only person who called her "sthandwa sam" (my love). "Ndiyakuthanda, sthandwa sam" (I love u, my love) was the only Xhosa phrase he knew because he was Sotho.

She sat up and rubbed her hands over her face. Trying to calm her breathing. Trying to make sense of that dream.

-Sthandiwe: "Danger? What danger? What was that dream about? Am I in danger by being with Alizwa maybe?"

Her train of thought got derailed by the ringing of her phone. She checked it. It was Alizwa. She had unblocked his calls. She answered, hesitantly.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey."

-Alizwa: "Good morning, baby."

-Sthandiwe: "Morning."

-Alizwa: "Are u okay? U don't sound so good."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm fine. Whatsup?"

-Alizwa: "Nothing much, I just wanted to say good morning. See u at work around lunch time?"

-Sthandiwe: " Sure. See u then."

She hung up. Got out of bed and went to the bathroom.

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Alizwa was calling Sthandiwe from the master bathroom in his house. He put the phone down and looked himself in the mirror. He kept staring at himself, his mind heavy with something. He then sighed. When he finally turned, he found Reneé in the doorway, in her wheelchair.

-Reneé: "Still battling with ur conscience?"

-Alizwa: "Good morning to u too, hon."

-Reneé: "What's that they say about sins of the father?"

Alizwa just looked at her.

-Reneé: "Look, I'm sure that the girl is a great person. I've also got nothing against her. But I have everything against her father who got the easy way out. He died and didn't get to live with the consequences of what he did. We are gonna take what was his, not what the girl has worked for. And

what we are gonna take is nothing compared to what Buyisile Blie took from us. Life is priceless. Think about that every time ur conscience tells u to back out, Al."

Alizwa just flashed that winning smile of his. Then walked up to her. He bent over and gave her a perk on the lips.

-Alizwa: "I love it when u get all worked up for nothing. So cute."

-Reneé: (smiling) "U are so not funny, u know that?"

-Alizwa: "I love u too."

He kissed her again.

-Alizwa: "Let me go hit the gym. A man's gotta keep this six pack."

He walked out and left Reneé there smiling. The love she had for her husband was just written all over her face.

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During lunch, Alizwa, went to Sthandiwe's office and knocked. Sthandiwe was working on her computer.

-Sthandiwe: "Come in."

Alizwa walked in, with a smile on his face.

-Alizwa: "Hey u."

His smile must have been contagious because Sthandiwe also smiled immediately, even though she was grumpy the whole day. She got up and went to give him a hug.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey urself."

-Alizwa: "I'm taking u out for lunch. U busy?"

-Sthandiwe: "I was just finishing a test paper. They are writing it tomorrow. Let me just save then we can go."

-Alizwa: "Great."

She saved the paper. Then took her handbag and they walked to the door.

-Sthandiwe: "So where are u taking me?"

-Alizwa: "Wait and see."

They walked out. Sthandiwe locked up her office. Xolisa was in the open lab opposite Sthandiwe's office, filling a measuring cylinder with distilled water. He was now looking at Alizwa and Sthandiwe leaving her office and walking down the corridor.

-Xolisa: (to himself) "No maan, I know this guy. Where do I know him from?"

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand trying to remember. Until he got distracted by the water spilling all over the floor. The cylinder was overflowing. He turned the tap off and got back to what he was doing.

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Alizwa took Sthandiwe to his humble apartment in an apartment building owned by him and his wife, in Rosebank. But of course, he didn't let Sthandiwe know that. He told her that's where he lived with his sister.

They walked in. The apartment was nice, simplest opulence.

-Sthandiwe: "Mmh, nice digs."

-Alizwa: "It was about time u came to see my place."

And him taking her to his place meant a lot to Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "So where's ur sister?"

-Alizwa: "Away. Work trip."

-Sthandiwe: "I hope to meet her some day. How old is she?"

-Alizwa: "Younger than me. And of course, u'll meet her. All in good time. But for now, it's just u and me."

-Sthandiwe: "I like the sound of that. So where's the lunch? I'm starved."

-Alizwa: (pointing) "Over there."

He was pointing towards the kitchen area. He took her hand and they walked closer to a picnic spread, on the floor, behind the island. All the eats in the basket. Rose petals scattered around. Champagne glasses. French champagne in a bucket of ice. The works.

-Sthandiwe: "Indoor picnic. Oh wow! I don't remember the last time I had this."

-Alizwa: "U like it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Love."

She said that already kicking off her shoes. Then sat down on the sponge. Alizwa smiled then joined her. He took the bubbly out of the bucket, popped it, and poured some in their glasses.

-Alizwa: (handing her the glass) "Wanna make a toast?"

-Sthandiwe: "To chance meetings."

But was it?

-Alizwa: "To the beginning of something beautiful."

They clinked their glasses. Then took their sips.

-Sthandiwe: "Do u believe in coincidences?"

-Alizwa: "I believe that coincidences are God's way of remaining anonymous. Why do u ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "The day we met, my car had a problem and I had to go take a taxi. If it didn't get fucked up we wouldn't have met that day."

-Alizwa: "Not that day maybe, but we would have met eventually."

-Sthandiwe: "U first saw me in May at my presentation but never got to see me again until that day even though we work in the same institution."

-Alizwa: "Then it was meant to be that day."

He let out his bright smile. Sthandiwe's heart skipped a beat. His smile was making her weak every time she sees it. Sending electric waves all over her body. She knew at that moment that she was really falling for this guy and there was no going back.

Insert #14

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After the picnic, Sthandiwe and Alizwa went back to campus. She got to her office and printed the test paper. They print from their office computers but go collect the printouts in the print room. So she went to the print room to collect the papers. On the way back, she met Xolisa in the corridor. And he blocked her way.

-Sthandiwe: "U like doing this, Xolisa. And it's annoying, if u didn't know."

-Xolisa: "So u seeing that guy now?"

-Sthandiwe: "What guy?"

-Xolisa: "U know the guy I'm talking about."

-Sthandiwe: "Who I see or not see is none of ur business, XO."

-Xolisa: "I still haven't figured out where I know him from but there's just something about him. I just don't trust him. U shouldn't either."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, that really makes sense coming from a guy that wants me for himself."

-Xolisa: "Drop the sarcasm and listen to what I'm saying. And I thought I told u this, I'm no longer after u."

-Sthandiwe: "Good to hear. Would u step aside now, please?"

Xolisa sighed and stepped aside. Sthandiwe went to drop the papers in her office then left. She went to her car and drove back to Rosebank. Only this time she was going to see her friend, Sihle. She wanted to make things right with her friends, especially with Palesa. But she didn't know how to reach out to her because she wasn't taking her calls. And the thought of losing her bestfriend just like that was driving her nuts. That's why she needed Sihle's help. On the way, she called Sihle telling her that she was coming over to see her.

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She got to Sihle's house and Sihle was home since she was not working. She let her in through the remote-controlled gate. Sthandiwe drove up the driveway and parked in front of the garage. She got out and Sihle's husband, Muzi, was playing with their four-year-old son. They were wrestling in their evergreen, artificial lawn. Tickling each other, laughing. Sthandiwe remained rooted in that spot, watching them. She found herself smiling.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Gosh, I so want that. A family of my own."

She was imagining herself with her own family when Sihle's voice brought her back to earth.

-Sihle: "Aren't u gonna come in?"

Sthandiwe turned to see Sihle standing on the doorstep.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, yeah, I'm coming."

Sthandiwe waved to Muzi and he waved back and continued playing with his son. She and Sihle walked inside the house. Sihle led the way to the kitchen. She was making sandwiches.

-Sihle: "I'm making sandwiches for my boys. Would u like some?"

-Sthandiwe: (sitting down) "Your boys. That sounds nice."

-Sihle: (smiling) "They're my everything. So u want the sandwich?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, thanks. I've had lunch already...I didn't think I'll find Muzi home. I thought he was still at work."

-Sihle: "It's his day off... I must say, I was surprised when I got ur call after u've been ignoring mine for days."

-Sthandiwe: "That's why I'm here, chomi. I want to apologise. I'm sorry for ignoring u. I'm sorry I involved u in my drama. I want my friend back now. Could u please forgive me?"

Sihle laughed.

-Sihle: "Come on, chomi, don't worry. U and I are cool. I'm not sure about Lisa though. She's really mad at u."

-Sthandiwe: "And I can't say I blame her."

-Sihle: "Wait, let me give them their sandwiches then we'll talk."

She took the tray to the door and called her son to come and take it.

-Sihle: "Make sure u and daddy wash ur hands in the outside tap before u eat, okay?"

-Her son: "Okay, mommy."

He left with the tray of sandwiches and Sihle came back inside to sit next to Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "U have such a warm home, chomi. A lovely family."

-Sihle: "And I thank God for them everyday. But now let's talk about u. What happened? Why did u do Chris like that? The guy loved u, Thandi. And I thought u had finally found the right guy in him. Why did u mess it up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Can we please not go there? I've messed up, I know. And there's nothing I can do to fix things between me and Chris now. Honestly, I don't even want us to fix them. He's just too good for a messed up girl like me. But if he could at least forgive me for what I did to him I'd be okay... I tried to apologise yesterday but he didn't wanna hear it."

-Sihle: "What did u expect? U are pushing it, Thandi. In fact, I'm sure ur apology felt like an insult to him. The guy's still hurting. U hurt him."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess u're right. But I hope he'll be able to forgive me eventually."

-Sihle: "Hope won't kill u, I guess. So, who's this guy u're screwing around with now?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't wanna talk about him. All I want is to fix things between me and Palesa. I just can't lose my friend. Our friendship means so much to me. I don't want it to end because of a man."

-Sihle: "That's gonna be tough considering that the man in question is her brother. Her only brother. Right now, u repulse her."

-Sthandiwe: "That's why I need ur help, Sihle. I don't know how to reach out to her. She's not taking my calls. And even if I could go to her place, I know she won't talk to me. She'd just throw me out. I know her."

-Sihle: "No. No, Thandi. I don't wanna get involved. I'm sorry but u're gonna have to deal with this one on ur own."

-Sthandiwe: "Sihle, please."

Sihle kept quiet for a moment, thinking.

-Sihle: "Okay, all I can do is to help u reach out to her. But I won't be no bridge between u guys. Just keep me out of it."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good enough, I guess."

-Sihle: "U know that her little sister's birthday is coming up, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. This coming weekend."

-Sihle: "So why don't u do something nice for her? Something that'd soften Lisa's heart. They couldn't get an act to perform at the party so if u could come through for them and sing at the party, I'm sure Lisa's heart would soften up and she would consider hearing u out."

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "U're kidding, right?"

-Sihle: "I'm not."

-Sthandiwe: "But, Sihle, u know that I don't do music anymore."

-Sihle: "Sthandiwe, u asked for my help. And now that I'm helping u're shooting me down?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'm sorry, friend. Okay, I'll think about it. Thanks, chom."

They hugged and Sthandiwe said her goodbyes and walked to the door.

-Sihle: "Oh, by the way I didn't get it."

Sthandiwe stopped at the door and turned, confused.

-Sthandiwe: "Huh? What didn't u get?"

-Sihle: "The job. Remember I went for an interview last week? Well, I didn't get the job. U never asked."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh my God, I'm such a bad friend."

She turned back and gave Sihle a hug.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, friend. But u are good at what u do so I'm sure u'll find something soon."

-Sihle: "I hope so hey."

Sihle broke the hug.

-Sihle: "Go now and think about my suggestion."

Sthandiwe nodded and left.

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That evening, Alizwa got home and found Reneé in the dining room, sitting, smiling in front of a beautiful candlelit spread. She looked beautiful in a red dress.

-Reneé: "Hey. I've been waiting for u."

-Alizwa: (taking in the setting) "Mmh! This is nice. What's the occasion?"

-Reneé: "We're celebrating."

-Alizwa: "What are we celebrating? U got some good news from ur physiotherapist today?"

-Reneé: "No, it's not that. We're celebrating our love. But I did get some news from our lawyer. Our divorce has been finalised. So I guess we could also celebrate that."

Alizwa chuckled.

-Alizwa: "O-kay. Celebrating a divorce, that's a first."

-Reneé: "That's because it's not real. It's just means to and end."

Alizwa walked up to her, leaned on the wheels of her self propelling wheelchair with his hands and kissed her. Then smiled.

-Alizwa: "I'm still crazy in love with u though, ex-wife."

-Reneé: (smiling) I'm in love with u too, ex-hubby.

They kissed again.

-Alizwa: "Okay, now let's pop that champagne and get this celebration going before I go."

-Reneé: "Before u go? Go where?"

-Alizwa: "I'm spending the night over at Thandi's tonight, remember?"

Reneé's face dropped, not liking the idea.

-Reneé: "Oh, yah, there's that."

-Alizwa: (looking at her) "What? U don't want me to go anymore?"

-Reneé: "No, it's okay. U can go."

-Alizwa: "U sure?"

-Reneé: "Of course. Now please...pour me that champagne. No make it something stronger. Boubourn."

She just wanted to drink up and forget about her husband spending the night in another woman's bed. She wasn't liking it but it was necessary, she kept telling herself.

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Alizwa got to Sthandiwe's house that night and she opened the door for him. She was just down, because she still didn't know how to fix the mess she caused between her and Palesa.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, come on in."

-Alizwa: (walking in) Are u okay? U don't look so good."

-Sthandiwe: (forcing a smile) "Of course, I'm okay. What do u mean?"

He closed the door then took her hand and led her to the couch. They sat down.

-Alizwa: (looking straight into her eyes) "Listen, baby, u can talk to me about anything. Okay?"

Sthandiwe nodded.

-Alizwa: "Now, let's do this again. What's wrong?"

Sthandiwe didn't want to share her problems but he wasn't gonna let it go so she told him.

-Sthandiwe: "Remember I told u that there's some beef between me and my friends?"

-Alizwa: (smiling) "Yeah...u said u were going through something."

-Sthandiwe: "Ri-i-i-ght. I kinda messed things up between me and Palesa. And now I want to fix them but she won't talk to me. I don't know how to reach out to her. And my other friend, Sihle, suggested that I start by doing something nice for her lil sister. Like...singing in her birthday party. That's insane."

-Alizwa: "Insane? Why? At least she's given u an idea where to start. Don't u wanna make things right with ur friend?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I do. And I don't have a problem with singing at the party, I used to perform at parties when I was still at varsity. Problem is I stopped doing music three years ago, after losing my father. I used to do music with him, so now every time I try I just see my dad and I just freeze."

-Alizwa: "U like music, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "It was my first love. Made me happy."

-Alizwa: "Then try and continue doing it. Ur father would want that too. He'd want u to do what u love."

-Sthandiwe: "U reckon?"

-Alizwa: "I'm sure he'd want that. Every father wants his kid to do what makes them happy. So go to ur friend's sister's party and do what u have to do to get ur friend back. And u'll also get ur life back in the process."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't think I can do it, Al. I don't even know if I still know how to."

-Alizwa: "U only did vocals?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, I also played and composed."

-Alizwa: "What instruments?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just piano, cello and a little bit of guitar. My dad taught me everything I know about music. But he was no cellist, I taught myself how to play cello. Hence it's the only instrument I play now. It doesn't remind me of him."

-Alizwa: "Okay, do u have a piano in the house now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. In the music room."

-Alizwa: "U've got a music room here?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, upstairs. Funny, just a few days ago u made urself comfortable in this house as if it was ur own but u don't know that it has a music room?"

-Alizwa: "I only used this room, the dining room and the kitchen."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't use the room either. I don't even go in there. Not anymore."

-Alizwa: "U haven't been in there in three years?"

-Sthandiwe: "Every time I tried to get in I would just freeze at the door and go back. But a few days ago I finally managed to step inside. But I couldn't play anything. I tried though but it didn't work. It was just too much."

-Alizwa: "Okay look, we'll do it together this time. I'll hold ur hand. We'll go in there and u'll start playing that piano. I'll be there every step of the way."

-Sthandiwe: "U'd do that for me?"

-Alizwa: "Of course. Why not?"

The way he said it, he made her believe that she could do it. He made her feel safe, invincible and able to do anything.

-Alizwa: "I'll even try it first."

-Sthandiwe: "U also play piano?"

-Alizwa: (smiling) "I can even play it in my sleep."

Sthandiwe stared at him for the longest. Smiling.

-Alizwa: "What? Why are u looking at me like that?"

-Sthandiwe: "U're so perfect for me. And I think I'm..."

-Alizwa: (interrupting) "Let's go try it now."

She was gonna tell him that she was falling in love with him and Alizwa saw it coming and interrupted her. He didn't want to hear it. It was just gonna be too difficult for him to hear her say it.

He smiled and took her hand. And they made their way upstairs.

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They got to the music room. Sthandiwe took a deep breath, holding on to Alizwa and they walked inside.

-Alizwa: (looking at the piano) "Oh wow. That's a mean grand piano. I own a baby grand. But this one, it's like...next level."

-Sthandiwe: "Go ahead, try it."

-Alizwa: "What do I play?"

-Sthandiwe: "Anything u like."

Alizwa went to sit in front of the piano. He took a moment. Then started playing his piece. He played so beautifully and Sthandiwe was captivated. She was standing there, taking in the sound, almost hypnotised. His music was going straight to her heart. It was so beautiful that she even found a tear escaping her eye. His music was making her fall in love with him even more. He stopped playing and looked at her.

-Alizwa: "Why are u crying? Was I that bad?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. No. That was beautiful, Al. Exquisite."

-Alizwa: "I wrote the piece myself."

-Sthandiwe: "Really? Wow! U good."

-Alizwa: "Thanks, I guess. But I don't do vocals, I suck in that department... So show me ur own piano piece."

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh...I'm not sure if I should though. After hearing urs."

-Alizwa: "Please."

Sthandiwe went to a deep drawer, between a lot of sheet music, she took out one. She gave it to Alizwa. Alizwa looked at it.

-Sthandiwe: "That's my best piece. It took me four months to finish it. And that was four years ago."

-Alizwa: "It's called 'Unconditional love.' Mhh. Wrote it for someone special?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah. Not really. Was just talking about unconditional love in general."

-Alizwa: "Come play it for me. I want to hear it."

He said that already getting off the chair for her to sit. Sthandiwe hesitated.

-Sthandiwe: "Not today. Maybe tomorrow."

-Alizwa: "U promise?"

-Sthandiwe: "I promise."

She came closer to him. Gave him a perk on the lips.

-Sthandiwe: "There's something I want more than playing piano right now. I want u."

She said that already kissing him. They kissed. The kiss got heated. And she could feel him getting hard. But he pulled back.

-Sthandiwe: "What's wrong?"

-Alizwa: "I can't do this."

-Sthandiwe: "Why? U don't want me? Is that it? Is that why u interrupted me earlier when I was about to tell u that I'm falling in love with u?"

Alizwa kept quiet.

-Sthandiwe: "Get out."

-Alizwa: "Thandi, wait...Listen, I'm falling in love with u too and it's freaking me out. I don't remember the last time I've felt this way about a woman. I even find myself worried that I'm gonna lose u and that freaks me out even more. We have a beautiful thing going here, Thandi, and I don't wanna mess it up as I always do. Let's try not to mess it up by rushing things, okay?"

Sthandiwe searched his eyes. They looked so sincere. She believed him.

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay. I get it. We can take things slow as u want us to. Okay?"

Alizwa kissed her. And they went to the bedroom. They got into bed and cuddled, no loving making.

In the middle of the night when Sthandiwe was fast asleep, Alizwa sneaked out of bed and made his way to the music room. He took the music scroll Sthandiwe showed to him. He folded it nicely. Went back to the bedroom and put it in the inner pocket of his jacket. Then went back to bed.

Insert #15

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The next morning, Sthandiwe woke up in Alizwa's arms, just a second before the alarm for her morning jog went off. She rolled over and turned it off. She didn't feel like waking up. She wished she could remain in his arms forever, but that wasn't possible. She looked at him, he was so handsome even in his sleep. She watched him, gently caressing his brow. She finally smiled to herself.

-Sthandiwe: (sotto voce) "This one's a keeper."

Even though she wanted them to make love last night, he offered her something more: intimacy without intercourse. She was still watching him when his eyes snapped open.

-Sthandiwe: "Good morning."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "Morning, pretty face."

-Sthandiwe: "Sleep well?"

-Alizwa: "Very. Sleeping next to u is all I needed. But why are u already up? Isn't it still early?"

-Sthandiwe: "Early? Are u kidding me?"

She said that already getting out of bed. She knew that if she could spend one more minute in that bed with him she would end up not wanting to wake up and miss work.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm going for my morning jog. U can go back to sleep or get up and make some breakfast, take a shower or whatever u choose."

-Alizwa: "No, I'm coming with u."

-Sthandiwe: "U coming with me? U don't look like the jogging type though, more like a treadmill typa guy. Besides, u don't have a gym gear here."

-Alizwa: "Says who? My gear is in my car. I work out every morning during the week, I wasn't gonna skip a day because I'm here. Was gonna wake up and go jogging 'cause I don't think u have a gym in the house."

-Sthandiwe: "Great then. Go take ur gear and hit the treadmill in the next room."

-Alizwa: (getting out of bed) "No, I'm coming with u."

-Sthandiwe: "U sure? I don't want u to get embarrassed when I outrun u."

-Alizwa: (hugging her from behind) "U? Outrun me? Baby, look at me with sober eyes."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Oh, please. U are all muscles and no stamina."

-Alizwa: (laughing) "What?"

He picked her up and threw her on the bed, playfully. Then got on top of her.

-Alizwa: (tickling her) "Say that again. What did u just say?"

Sthandiwe was now laughing uncontrollable and running out of breath.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm...I'm sor...sorry, baby."

Alizwa kept tickling her.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby...please s..stoooooop."

Alizwa finally stopped and kissed her. Sthandiwe was now catching her breath.

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "U are evil."

-Alizwa: (smiling too) "U are the evil one, for saying I have no stamina. Thought we had a marathon that night at the hotel. Or u still want me to show u how far I can go?"

-Sthandiwe: (punching his ribs playfully) "Ur mind is filthy. That's not the stamina I was talking about."

-Alizwa: "I know."

He said that climbing down the bed.

-Alizwa: "Lemme go get my bag from the car."

Right at that moment, Sthandiwe wanted him. She wanted them to do the nasty but he wasn't gonna go there. He went to his car and came back with his bag. Sthandiwe was now dressed for the jog. He got dressed too and they went to rinse their faces and brushed their teeth then went jogging. They kept the same pace until they got back. Alizwa didn't wanna share a shower with Sthandiwe so she let him use the one in their en-suite bathroom and she left to use the one in the guest bathroom. They finished and got dressed for work. Alizwa had fresh clothes to change into in the bag. Then they went to the kitchen and had some cereal. And Sthandiwe also made a fruit smoothie. They had the smoothie, washed the dishes and left for work in their separate cars.

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Sthandiwe got to work and because it was a Wednesday, she had only one lecture. It was at 8:55. She went to conduct it and came back to her office. She tried to do some admin work but she kept thinking about fixing her friendship with Palesa. The singing in her sister's 18th birthday party was just a crazy idea to her, something she wasn't gonna do. She decided to try her on the phone again, but still she wouldn't pick up. So she decided to just go and try to talk to her at her workplace. She left her office, got to her car and drove to Jo'burg. Palesa was working at a bank in Carlton Centre downtown. And that's where Sthandiwe was going. But when she got there, Palesa wouldn't give her even a minute of her time. She just told her to get her slutty ass out of her face and keep her distance from her.

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She drove back to campus heartbroken. But she wasn't about to give up on their friendship just like that, not after everything they've been through over the past six years. She got to her office and thought about what she was gonna do next. But she couldn't come up with anything. So she decided to call Sihle.

-Sihle: "Hey chomi."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey chomi. I'm not okay, u know."

-Sihle: "What's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: "Palesa is going on. I went to her workplace, wanting to talk to her but she kicked me out like a dog. It hurts, Sihle. It hurts. I don't know what to do."

-Sihle: "The only way u can fix this is to do what I suggested yesterday then drop this new guy of urs."

Sthandiwe kept quiet for a moment.

-Sihle: "Are u listening to me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Yeah. Sure. I hear u, chomi. Thanks, bye."

She hung up. There was no way she was going to drop Alizwa. She loved him. She sat there thinking. Then she took her phone, scrolled down in her contacts until she reached "KG". She dialled but it sent her straight to "The number u have dialled does not exist." She hung up.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I knew that. Was just trying my luck...(sigh) What do I do now?"

She took the office phone and called one of her course tutors.

-Sthandiwe: (into phone) "Letty, please come to my office now if u aren't busy."

-Letty: "No, I'm not busy, Miss B. I'll be there in ten."

-Sthandiwe: "Good."

She hung up.

After 10 minutes Letty arrived. She was a 20-year old pretty coloured girl, doing Honours. Sthandiwe gave her the test question papers she printed the day before as the test was gonna be written that day at two. Letty and the other tutors were gonna invigilate. Sthandiwe clarified the test instructions to her and told her that she wasn't gonna be present when the students write, but if they experience any problem they should call her. After Letty left, Sthandiwe took her car keys and left her office. It was now just after 13:00. She got to her car and drove out.

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On her way, Alizwa called. She answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey u."

-Alizwa: "Hey babe. Free for lunch?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, sorry. I'm out."

-Alizwa: "U're driving? Where are u going?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm driving to Palmridge."

-Alizwa: "Palmridge? Near Katlehong?"

-Sthandiwe: "Katlehong, yeah."

-Alizwa: "What are u doing there?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm going to see an old friend."

-Alizwa: "Do u really have to go see them now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, Al. It's important that I see him."

Alizwa kept quiet for a moment. Then:

-Alizwa: "So the friend is a he."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Of course, it's a he. Why? Are u jealous?"

-Alizwa: "What if I am? Have u checked urself in the mirror lately? Baby, u are hot so I'm allowed to be jealous."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Well, u've got nothing to worry about, okay?"

-Alizwa: "See u tonight?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, sure, see u tonight. Bye now."

She hung up.

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Alizwa was calling from his office. He slowly put the phone down. With a stony expression on his face. Was he really jealous?

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Sthandiwe was going to see her old friend, Kagiso aka KG, in Palmridge. Wasn't even sure if she'd find him though.

Insert #16

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Sthandiwe was already passing Braamfontein when she decided to make a u-turn and drive back to her house. She got there and went straight to the bedroom. She took off her body hugging dress and

stilettoes and put on black jeans, a white Guess T-shirt, a black leather jacket and white All Star sneakers. She let her hair down and put on a black cap. Then removed her red lipstick and put on a nude lipgloss. Then went back to her car and continued with her drive to Palmridge to see her old friend, KG. The thought of losing Palesa reminded her of how she lost him. She wasn't sure of what really happened to him but she wanted to know before she could continue fixing her friendship with Palesa. Plus, KG was a free spirit, so care-free, just a happy soul, always smiling and joking around. The live-for-today-and-fuck-tomorrow kind of guy. He was just a breath of fresh air. And Sthandiwe needed that kind of friend that day.

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She and KG became very close friends when they were still younger, doing their first year in varsity. That was before she met Sihle and Palesa and life was much simpler then, no drama. KG is two years older than her and back then he was like a brother she never had. And apart from doing the same course, they also shared the love of music. They would create and perform music together in those campus shows. And they were a campus hit, very popular. But KG was more popular. He was versatile, he could easily switch from Maxwell's falsetto to dropping lines like Jay Z and executing Usher's dance moves. And that made him very popular with the ladies. And he took advantage of that, he changed girls like underwears.

But after finishing his junior degree, KG couldn't continue with his studies - financial issues. And that's when their friendship took a knock. He was staying in Palmridge and Sthandiwe was in Auckland Park and they hardly saw each other. But they tried to stay in touch until one day when Sthandiwe tried to call him and got "The number u have dialled does not exist." And when she checked him on social media, all his accounts were deactivated. And she went to check him at home 2 times and in both times she was met with a locked gate and an empty yard, and the neighbours didn't know anything. She slowly forgot about him over time until he was completely out of her life. That happened 4 years earlier. So she didn't know what really happened to him but on that day she was determined to find out.

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She got to Palmridge and when she was driving up KG's street, she saw a silver Toyota Corolla coming from the opposite direction and getting in KG's gate. She prayed it was his. She parked a few feet away from KG's gate, got out of the car and made her way to the gate. When she was getting in, KG was getting out of the Corolla. He stopped, looked at her and smiled. For a moment, Sthandiwe pulled statue of liberty, not believing that she was really seeing her old best buddy.

-KG: (excited) "ST is that u? Oh my God."

-Sthandiwe: "In the flesh, gazi."

They strode to each other and gave each other a hug. And made their unique handshake. A happy reunion.

-KG: "Gazi, I can't believe u really here. How long has it been?"

-Sthandiwe: "Four years. And u haven't changed a bit."

-KG: (looking at her from head to toe) "And u getting finer with each year that passes."

-Sthandiwe: "Now u being cheesy. And it doesn't suit u."

They laughed. KG's mother, MaKhumalo, got out of the Corolla's passenger side.

-MaKhumalo: "Thandi is that u? Oh my, nali iXhosa lam [here's my iXhosa girl]"

-KG: "It's umXhosa, Ma. Not iXhosa."

-MaKhumalo: "Shut up, boy. She knows what I mean."

She turned to Sthandiwe, her arms wide opened.

-MaKhumalo: "Come give me a hug, sweetheart. It's been a while."

-Sthandiwe: "Sawubona, Ma [Hello, Ma]"

They hugged. MaKhumalo is a friendly, bubbly and talkative woman.

-MaKhumalo: "I'm glad u came to check up on him. He needs some good influence in his life. U were good for him and I honestly thought u'd end up together"

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Ah, no, Ma. Expecting to see that is like expecting to see a desert in Europe. U're never gonna see it. That'd be like committing incest, he's like a brother to me."

-MaKhumalo: "Fine. But keep him in line hey. Tell him to stop bringing crazy floozies in this house."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll try."

-MaKhumalo: "It's good to see u, baby."

She said that already walking to the house.

-Sthandiwe: "Ditto."

-KG: "Was that u driving up the street when I was driving in?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

-KG: "Lemme go see ur wheels."

They both walked out the gate.

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-KG: "Wow! That's a mean German machine."

The car was a black BMW. After admiring it. They both leaned on its bonnet (hood).

-KG: "But I'm not surprised. U are BB's daughter. U were born with a silver spoon in ur mouth."

BB was Buyisile Blie, Sthandiwe's father.

-Sthandiwe: "BB. Yeah hey. The big guy's pushing daisies now."

-KG: (shocked) "What? BB is dead?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Three years ago. Car accident. Together with my mom."

-KG: "My God, I'm sorry, I didn't know. They guy hated my guts, didn't want me anywhere near u. But it's sad to hear that he's gone."

-Sthandiwe: "Said u were a bad influence on me. And he was right, u were."

-KG: "What? Gazi, we both know that's not true... I was really scared of ur old man though. That's why I never went to check up on u at home in the past few years. Didn't wanna be met by him. Didn't know he's gone."

-Sthandiwe: "So what happened with u? Why did u go dark? U got me worried."

-KG: "It's a long story."

He said that lying with his back on the bonnet of the car. Sthandiwe laid next to him. And they both stared up.

-Sthandiwe: "I've got all the time in the world."

-KG: "It's this thing of picking up random girls. One time, I picked up a wrong one. I mean, I made it clear to her that we were just two adults having fun, nothing more. But after that night, the girl became obsessed with me, kept throwing herself at me. When I rejected her, she went psycho on me. Sending me weird, threatening messages. Stalking me. I had to change my number and deactivate my social media accounts. But the madness escalated, she kept sending creepy gifts to the house. And it got worse when she had my young bro abducted. It just got ugly and we had to involve the cops. The girl was really crazy. We even had to pack our stuff and go stay with my uncle in Orlando. But the whole thing got sorted out eventually."

-Sthandiwe: "Yoh. That's hectic. But u still didn't learn a lesson. Ur mom says u still bring crazy floozies in the yard. U are an adult now, gazi, not a varsity student. Be responsible."

-KG: "Don't act all high and mighty with me, fool. U were just like me, u just couldn't stay in one relationship for long."

-Sthandiwe: "It wasn't by choice, fool. U know that."

-KG: "Still the same?"

-Sthandiwe: "Pretty much. My luck with men hasn't changed at all. But I've just met this one guy. Our thing is still new but I'm really into him. He gets me, he knows what I like and he's not even after sex. He's not tapping this base camp."

-KG: (looking at her) "What? U guys are not having sex?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, KG. We just cuddle till the morning. There's nothing wrong with that."

-KG: "U even share a bed but no shagging? Are u sure he's not a fag though? I mean, the only man that can resist ur hot body is me, ur only brother."

-Sthandiwe: "Shut up, fool. He's not gay. He just respects me and I love him for that."

-KG: "I'm glad u happy then. I'm also trying to change. My girl's preg. I'm gonna be a father soon so I'm trying to do the right thing."

-Sthandiwe: (excited) "U're gonna be a father? Wow! Congrats, gazi. She must be really special hey. U love her?"

-KG: "She's a sweet girl."

-Sthandiwe: "U haven't answered my question."

-KG: "I know and I'm not gonna answer."

-Sthandiwe: "Some things never change hey."

They stared up, then both turned at the same time and looked at each other.

-Together at the same time: "I missed u, fool."

They both laughed.

-KG: "So, why did u decide to come check on me today? And u got lucky, I didn't go to work. Had things to sort out with MaKhumalo."

-Sthandiwe: "I was missing ur crazy ass. And I just wanted to get out of the office. I felt like I was suffocating in there. Drowning in the consequences of the choices I made. With no one to talk to. Couldn't talk to my friends, couldn't talk to my man either, 'cause he's the cause. So I wanted someone neutral, someone who's not gonna judge me."

-KG: "No judgement here, gazi. 'Cause I'm not even gonna listen to ur problems. U can't come here and offload on me. I'm not ur shrink. Dude, I've got problems of my own. But I'll tell u what...let's just go to a tarven and get wasted. Forget about our problems."

-Sthandiwe: "On a Wednesday? U sure are a bad influence."

-KG: "C'mon, everyone needs to just let loose and have fun at some point. Dance like nobody's watching and just live like it's heaven on earth."

-Sthandiwe: "And sing like nobody's listening."

-KG: "Exactly."

-Sthandiwe: "Speaking of...Do u still do music?"

-KG: "Not without u, I don't"

-Sthandiwe: "Same here. Now let's go have fun and be rowdy."

-KG: "We'll walk. Go park ur car in the driveway. Don't say anything to MaKhumalo. I know she'll talk until Jesus comes back."

Sthandiwe laughed. Then went to park the car inside the yard and they left.

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They got to the tarven and it was empty, there were only three guys in there. They ordered a table full of ciders. They drank, talking shit, laughing. They were now tipsy, getting rowdy. And they got up and started dancing to the music that was playing. Just going crazy. After 18:00 more people started to turn up. They got joined by another couple and they all ordered more booze, got wasted and danced the evening away. And no man was even coming close to Sthandiwe because they thought KG was her boyfriend as they were all over each other all the time, and grinding on each other on the dance floor. She was having crazy fun, completely forgotten about Alizwa and the appointment they had.

Insert #18

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The following morning, Sthandiwe got woken up by a rough knock on KG's door. She opened her eyes but they involuntarily closed again quickly, they couldn't take the bright light. After that epic night, she had the mother of all headaches. She put a hand on her forehead. It was pounding like hell.

-Sthandiwe: "Ouch! Ouch!"

She slowly opened her eyes again, trying to adjust to the light. She looked up. She didn't recognise her surroundings and she wasn't remembering anything from the previous night.

-Sthandiwe: "Where the hell am I?"

She looked to her side, there was no one. Her entire body was aching like hell, she felt like she had been run over by a truck. She tried to move her legs but there was something heavy on them. She looked down, and there he was, KG sleeping across the bed with his head on her legs. It all slowly came back to her. The person was still pounding on the door. Sthandiwe used all the strength she had in her aching body to kick KG off of her.

-Sthandiwe: " KG, move, dude. I'm not ur pillow."

-KG: "Geez, dude. Do u have to be that loud?"

He said that trying to sit up straight. Massaging both his temples with his index and middle fingers of both hands. Eyes closed.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, there's someone at the door."

-KG: "Tell them to fuck off."

He said that plopping down on the bed again.

-Sthandiwe: "Mnxxm! Idiot."

She rubbed her hands over her face, climbed down the bed and dragged herself to the door. She was still fully-dressed, including the sneakers. They both couldn't take off anything the previous night, they were wasted. She opened the door. At the door she found a tall, light-skinned, pregnant woman. She must have been six months or so.

-Sthandiwe: "Hi."

-The Woman: "Who are u?"

-Sthandiwe: "Who are U?"

The woman was shooting daggers at her. And it was clear from her look that the only thing that was preventing her from beating the hell out of Sthandiwe was the baby in her tummy.

-The Woman: "U have a nerve hey. Asking me that in my man's flat."

-Sthandiwe: (realising) "Oh, sorry, dear. U must be KG's girlfriend. She told me about u. I'm Sthandiwe. His friend."

-The Woman: "Friend? Bitch please. Don't insult my intelligence. Is that why u were all over him last night at the tavern? Be happy I'm pregnant otherwise I would be panelbeating u right now, bitch."

She violently pushed Sthandiwe aside and walked inside.

-Sthandiwe: "O-kay. U know what sisi? I'm exhausted and I have a terrible headache. So I don't have time for this. Take it up with ur man. I'm outta here."

She walked out, leaving KG's girlfriend standing there, still calling her names. KG was sleeping, not coming to her rescue.

She walked out, went to an outside tap and splashed water on her face. Then opened the zip of the pocket of her leather jacket and came out with her car keys. She got to her car and hopped inside. She looked at herself in the rear-view mirror. She looked like hell.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit! What was I thinking? On a Wednesday?"

She took her phone and turned on the display. She had three missed calls from Alizwa. She sighed.

KG's girlfriend had left the gate open so she started the engine and drove out, before MaKhumalo could see her.

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She got to her house and went to the bathroom. Took paracetamol out of the medicine cabinet and downed two pills, then went to take a shower. She was running late for work. After doing all the necessities, she put on blue jeans, white T-shirt, white jacket and white sneakers. Tied her hair up and did minimal makeup. No time to dress up. She put on sunglasses to cover her hungover eyes. Then left for work.

On the way, Alizwa called. She answered knowing he was gonna give her hell for not honoring their appointment the night before.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, babe."

-Alizwa: "Hey. What happened last night? Tried to call u but u didn't pick up. Also went to ur house, u weren't there."

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, babe. I slept over at my friend's and I had misplaced my phone."

-Alizwa: "Slept over at a guy's place?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. He's my friend, Al. Something wrong with that?"

-Alizwa: "I don't like it. But we'll talk about it later, during lunch time, face to face."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh okay. But, Al, I..."

She didn't finish. Alizwa dropped the call. She sighed, hating to have to explain herself.

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She got to her office and went to sit behind her desk. The hangover headache was still killing her. She took off her sunglasses and rested her head on her desk and closed her eyes for what she thought would just be a minute. But she just passed out. Luckily her two lectures for the day were at 10:45 and 11:40. She got woken up by a knock on the door. She looked up and tried to compose herself.

-Sthandiwe: "Come in."

Xolisa walked in, carrying his tablet PC. He looked at her tired face.

-Xolisa: "Geez! U look like death warmed over. What's up? Hangover?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not now, Xolisa, please. I'm not in the mood."

-Xolisa: "I have some news for u. But it's not good."

-Sthandiwe: "Just tell me already, man, and leave."

-Xolisa: "That guy. Alizwa Zakhe. Are u really seeing him?"

-Sthandiwe: "Fuck! This is the worst day of my life. God please take me now. Are u still at that, Xolisa? Really? Just give it up already, man."

-Xolisa: "Listen. I remembered where I first saw the guy. At The Bahamas, four years ago. I was there with my then girlfriend and he was there with his wife for a honeymoon. They were the only South Africans in the hotel we were staying in. He is..."

He didn't finish. What he was saying was now registering in Sthandiwe's mind.

-Sthandiwe: "What? Alizwa? A wife?"

-Xolisa: "Yeah. He's married to Reneé Parker. The daughter of Anthony Parker."

Sthandiwe blinked several times, trying to see if she wasn't dreaming. She couldn't believe what Xolisa was saying.

-Sthandiwe: "Anthony Parker, the famous businessman?"

-Xolisa: "The one and only."

-Sthandiwe: (swallowing) "No. No. No. Xolisa u making a mistake. Alizwa is not married. He stays with his sister in an apartment in Rosebank. I've been there."

She was just in denial. Xolisa tapped on his tablet and held it up for her to see.

-Xolisa: "This is their wedding photo. Look at it."

Insert #19

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Sthandiwe looked at the photo. She found it difficult to take in what she was seeing. Alizwa and Reneé looked so happy in the photo, with big smiles and his arm was wrapped around her waist. Again, she blinked several times hoping that what she was seeing was all a lie. But it was real.

It was 10°C that day but she felt her temperature rising, she got hot and started fanning herself with her hands. They say Earth is revolving, but no one actually feels it move. But at that moment, she swore she felt it moving. But actually it was her head, she was feeling dizzy. And running out of breath. She faltered and almost fell off her chair but Xolisa caught her in his arms. He hugged her tight. She wanted to say something but she couldn't, she didn't want to cry but she couldn't hold the tears back. They started flooding out of her eyes, wetting Xolisa's shoulder, but he didn't mind.

She was deeply hurt. The man she had fallen so hard for was not who or what she thought he was. To know that he was playing her all this time hurt so much. She cried on Xolisa's shoulder until she couldn't cry anymore. She let go of him and sat up straight on her chair and tried to wipe her tears with her hand. Xolisa held her other hand and looked straight into her eyes.

-Xolisa: "I'm sorry u had to find out this way and my timing was bad, I know. But u had to know the truth. I care about u, Sthandiwe, I couldn't just sit back and watch him play u like that. I don't want to see u hurt."

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay. And thank u, Xolisa. Thank u for letting me know. But I need to be alone right now."

-Xolisa: "Of course. But call me if u need anything. Okay? I got ur back, buddy. I got u."

He left.

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Sthandiwe went to lock the door and leaned on it with her back. The pain she was feeling was just too much. She couldn't believe that she had gotten herself into another fucked up relationship once again. She thought about Chris, the man that loved her but she pushed away. Tears started to trickle down her cheeks again. She slowly slid down the door and sat on the floor. She was now crying uncontrollable. Until she heard a knock on her door. She didn't wanna see anyone, so she just ignored it. She got up and went to sit on her chair. It was Letty at the door and she could hear some movement inside but no one was coming to open up for her.

-Letty: "Miss B, It's Letty. I've brought the test scripts."

-Sthandiwe: "Just go away, Letty."

Letty was confused but she could hear from her voice that she actually means it. So she walked away with the scripts.

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Sthandiwe wanted to talk to someone, but she couldn't really talk to Xolisa because she was feeling embarrassed. He had "told her so" but she just dismissed him. And obviously she couldn't talk to Sihle and Palesa. She couldn't talk to KG either because she didn't want to get him into trouble with his girlfriend again. She felt so alone and hurt. And she regretted pushing Chris away. She regretted not giving him a chance. She regretted choosing Alizwa over him.

She sat there crying until she realised that she was running out of time for her first lecture. Between the hangover and the heartbreak, she was definitely not feeling up to it. But she had to go. She wiped her

tears and powdered her face. She put the sunglasses back on to hide those puffy, bloodshot eyes. It took every strength she had to go to the lecture halls and carry both lectures, but she did it. And after the last one, at 12:35, she went back to her office. As she moved up the corridor, she noticed Alizwa standing in front of her office. His face, the sight of him was just too much. She started to feel the anger boiling deep inside her. Rage was filling every cell of her body. But she didn't wanna cause a scene at her department so she took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down. She walked up to him and greeted calmly.

-Alizwa: "We need to talk."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah we do."

-Alizwa: "Let's go to my apartment."

-Sthandiwe: "No. Why don't we go to my house instead? I mean it's the closest."

-Alizwa: "Cool."

They went to his car and drove to her house. There was an awkward silence on the way, until they got there.

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They got to the house and he parked in the driveway. But Sthandiwe didn't even get out of the car. Her anger was already getting out of control. She started grilling him right there in the car.

-Sthandiwe: "Am I ur stupid, Alizwa?"

-Alizwa: "What are u talking about? I'm the one who should be asking u that. What happened last night?"

-Sthandiwe: (angry) "Fuck last night and tell me about ur wife, u lying bastard. Why did u lie to me? I asked u on the very first day I met u if u have a wife. And what did u say? Huh? U said no. Why? Why did u lie?"

-Alizwa: (calm) "Where did u get that info from?"

His calmness and his stupid question were just infuriating her even more.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't ask me bullshit, Alizwa. I asked u a question. Why did u fuckin' lie to me?"

-Alizwa: "I didn't lie to u. I never lied. Thandi, I love u too much to lie to u."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't u dare! Don't u dare tell me that shit. Just answer the damn question."

Alizwa shifted in his chair and turned to look at her.

-Alizwa: "Okay, I'll tell u everything. Nothing but the truth. I WAS married but not anymore. Four years ago I married the mother of my son. Our son was two years old when we got married and I was over the

moon. We were this small happy family but a year later everything changed. Something tragic happened. We were on our way back here from Queenstown when it all happened. My then wife was driving and my son was strapped in his seat at the back of the car, right behind his mother. Some stupid fool jumped red robots and drove right straight to us, hitting the driver's side of the car. My son didn't make it, his mother got paralysed and I got off with just minor bruises. After that day our marriage just went south. My wife got depressed and she blamed me for the whole thing. I'm the one who insisted that she drive and I changed my son's car seat to her side of the car. If I didn't, he probably would have made it and her mother would be the one that got off with minor bruises not me. She resented me and we ended up separating. A year later she applied for a divorce and it just got finalised a few days ago. But we were no longer together, obviously. So no, Thandi, I didn't lie to u. I didn't lie. What I'm telling u now is the honest truth and I can even get u proof if u want."

All the time he was talking, Sthandiwe was not moving, just staring at him. She was reading his face and she could see the pain written all over it as he was reliving the painful tragedy that had happened three years earlier. She could see the pain in his eyes. And she believed him. All the feelings of anger were now gone and all she was feeling was empathy.

-Sthandiwe: (calmly) "I'm so sorry to hear this, baby. But why didn't u tell me? U should have told me, Al."

-Alizwa: "It's not something I like talking about. It's too painful. But I was gonna tell u. Believe me I was. I was just waiting for the right time. Please tell me u believe me."

Sthandiwe kept quiet for a moment. She could see the sincerity in his eyes. She moved closer and gave him a hug.

-Sthandiwe: "I believe u, baby. I believe u. And I'm sorry for getting all angry and for shouting at u."

-Alizwa: "No, u don't need to apologise. I would have done the same thing too."

He pulled back from the hug and looked at her.

-Alizwa: "Actually, I should be the one to apologise. I'm sorry I didn't tell u this earlier. I'm really sorry, babe."

She just kissed him.

-Alizwa: "I love u, Thandi, and u are the first woman I've felt this way about after my ex-wife."

-Sthandiwe: "I love u too, babe."

They stayed in the car and talked a bit more before driving back to the campus.

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Sthandiwe went back to her office and found the box with the test scripts at her door. She took them inside and started marking. She was now back to her old self. In love and happy. The day continued as normal as it could be until she went back home.

Insert #20

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That afternoon, Sthandiwe got home and retrieved the box with the test scripts from the back seat of her car and went inside the house. She went to put the scripts upstairs in the study where she was gonna mark them after cooking supper. As she put the box on the desk, something on the notice board caught her eye. It was one of the many quotes that she would print and stick on the notice board, "Every fact has a reverse." She couldn't help but wonder if what Alizwa had told her earlier was the fact or its reverse. She believed him because she could see the pain written all over his face as he was telling that tragic story, and it was real pain, he wasn't faking that one. BB, Sthandiwe's father, did jump red robots(traffic lights) 3 years earlier and hit Alizwa's car, killing Alizwa's son and paralyzing Reneé, before his own car got hit by a truck killing him and his wife instantly. But of course, everything else was a lie. However, Sthandiwe didn't know any of that. She was still wondering. And the more she thought about it, the more it didn't add up. She recalled the thoughts she had about Alizwa on the day of their first date.

"How does he get to afford his expensive outfits, watches and cars? With his salary I'm certain that he can't afford any of that but if he's still Anthony Parker's son-in-law then he can afford all of that and more. And it sure as hell could not be what he got from the divorce settlement because he said the divorce has just been finalised a few days back."

She got determined to find out more about this guy that she had let inside her heart. She didn't wanna hire a PI because she didn't want her business to be known by other people, she didn't trust that "confidentiality" bullshit, a person is a person. So she decided to go to her friend, Sihle, instead. Sihle was working as an investigative journalist before she was forced to quit her job 6 months earlier. She was finding answers for a living, and it was in her blood. She may have been out of a job at that moment but she still had the skill. She always said if she wasn't an investigative journalist she'd be a cop and quickly rise to make detective. Even in varsity when Sthandiwe and Palesa would watch "Musical" movies, she'd be watching movies in the "Crime, Detective, Spy" genre. And she liked the "Discovery ID Extra" channel. So Sthandiwe thought if she was gonna fork out money to pay someone to run a background check on Alizwa then it might as well be her out-of-a-job friend. She took her phone and called her telling her that she was coming over. Sihle was cool with that.

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She drove to Sihle's house, got there and she let her in. Muzi wasn't home and their son was in his bedroom watching cartoons. So they had time to talk. Sthandiwe told her about the assignment she had for her but she didn't tell her the whole story, she couldn't. Sihle accepted the assignment even though she had internal doubts. Yes, Sthandiwe didn't tell her what this Alizwa Zakhe guy was to her but she had a feeling that he was her new man. She didn't wanna be in the middle of the drama or get on Palesa's wrong side but she took the assignment anyway because she needed the money. She told Sthandiwe that she'd start with it right away. They hugged and Sthandiwe left.

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She drove home and found KG's car parked in her driveway and KG leaning on its boot (trunk). It was now around 19:00. She parked in the entrance, got out and walked up to him.

-Sthandiwe: "KG? What are u doing here?"

-KG: "Hello to ur crazy ass too."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Mnxm! U're stupid."

They shared their unique handshake. And both leaned on the boot of the car.

-KG: "I'm here to see u. Is that a crime?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not at all. Just that I don't want a repeat of what happened this morning. No offense, but ur girl's crazy."

-KG: "Apparently, her friend saw us at the tavern last night and told her. But she needs to chill, we've been best buddies before she even came into the picture."

-Sthandiwe: "U're sure she won't give u hell?"

-KG: "What are u asking me now? U know me, ST. No woman tells me what to or not to do. Except for u and MaKhumalo of course."

He said the last part smiling.

-Sthandiwe: "Well then, welcome to my digs, gazi."

-KG: "And tonight it's my turn to sleep over."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "I'd love that."

She really needed some distraction.

-KG: "Look inside the car."

She went to look and saw his 88-key keyboard inside.

-Sthandiwe: "U still have this? Oh wow. But what are u doing here with it?"

-KG: "We aren't going to sleep tonight. After seeing u, I thought of the chemistry we used to create on stage back in the day. We made good music together and I didn't know how much I missed that until I saw u yesterday."

-Sthandiwe: "But Kagiso, I no longer do music. That's history."

-KG: "History we are going to repeat. And I ain't taking no for an answer. I don't even want to know ur reasons for quitting but now I'm back in ur life and we're doing this."

He said that already opening the backseat door of his car, taking out the keyboard and an extension electric cable. Sthandiwe wasn't sure about all that but she thought "Okay maybe this is what I need to take my mind off Alizwa and this whole drama." She opened the garage door and told KG to put the keyboard down and go park his car inside. She went to park hers inside the double garage as well.

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They walked inside the house and KG put the keyboard on the coffee table and plugged the extension cable in the wall socket. Then plugged the keyboard in it.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm hungry. Do u want anything?"

-KG: "Dude, I'm not here for food. At least not that kind. I'm here for music, soul food."

She laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "Good. U just saved me from cooking."

She was no longer in the mood for standing at the stove after her doubts about Alizwa.

-KG: "U still don't like cooking? And u wonder why men leave u? Don't u know that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach?"

-Sthandiwe: "Ey shut up, Kagiso. I'm no man's wife."

She went to the kitchen and made herself some cereal and took some fruit. Then went to join KG in the living room and ate. KG had some fruit.

Then he started playing the keyboard and it was slowly taking Sthandiwe back to their varsity days.

-Sthandiwe: "Do u still remember the last song we ever made together? And students would go crazy every time we performed it at varsity."

-KG: "Of course, how could I forget, "Fight just to make up"? Still remember how to play it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Are u kidding me? Could I compose a song then forget it?"

-KG: "Then come play it and we'll sing it together just like old times."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, I don't think I can hey."

-KG: "No excuses, please."

He said that already shifting away from the keyboard to allow her to sit in front of it.

Sthandiwe hasitated but she went to sit anyway. She took a deep breath then started playing. They sang the song together and she played the keyboard so well. By the time she finished, she was already in the zone, pumped up.

-Sthandiwe: (excited) "Wow! I can't believe I did it. I didn't even know how much I missed this until now. Thank u, KG, for reminding me who I am."

-KG: "U also did the same for me...and u still play well."

He kissed her on the cheek then went to stand behind her, behind the couch and hugged her shoulders from behind.

-KG: "Let's start from the top. Nah, just the chorus."

-Sthandiwe: "No, KG. Wasn't that enough for one night?"

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Outside, Alizwa was arriving. He parked in the driveway and made his way to the front door, carrying a bouquet of flowers for Sthandiwe. But at the door he stopped, hearing Sthandiwe with another man inside. He listened in.

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KG had managed to convince Sthandiwe to continue. They were doing the chorus again.

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"I love it when we fight just to make up

U push me down, just to pull me up

U push me away, just to pull me closer

U are such a tease

I love it when we fight just to make up

U make me cry, just to make me smile

U push me down, just to lift me up

U are such a turn on

That's why I keep coming back for more."

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They sang it so well, repeating it twice. When they finished, they high-fived.

-Together: (excited) "We did it."

KG squeezed her shoulders from behind and kissed her on the cheek again. Then quickly jumped over the couch and picked her up, lifting her off the ground. Sthandiwe's legs had KG in scissor-lock as he spun her around and around the room. She was squealing with delight. Laughing out loud. Until he put her down.

-KG: "U have a special place in my heart. I was so lost without u."

-Sthandiwe: "I love u too, fool."

He kissed her on the forehead. Just then there was a hard knock at the door. KG looked at Sthandiwe then to the door.

-KG: "Expecting someone?"

She shook her head "no", then went to open. She got shocked to see Alizwa because he hadn't told her that he was coming over. He looked pissed. He walked inside and gave KG a cold stare.

-Alizwa: "What the hell's going on here, Thandi? Who's this?"

Dangerous Love

Insert #21

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Alizwa was still standing there, with the flowers in one hand, waiting for an answer.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, I didn't know u were coming."

-Alizwa: "What's going on?"

It was evident from his voice that he was pissed but was trying so hard to control his anger.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, this is my friend, Kagiso. The one from Palmridge. I called him over to help me get back on that horse (pointing to the keyboard). As u know, I've been struggling. (to KG) KG, this is my man, Alizwa."

-KG: "Good to meet u, bra."

He said that extending his hand for a handshake. But Alizwa didn't accept it. He just tucked his free hand in his pocket and shot Sthandiwe a piercing look. Her look back begged him not to say anything unpleasant. Eventually:

-Alizwa: (handing her the flowers) "These are urs. Put them in water."

-Sthandiwe: (forcing a smile) "They're beautiful. Thank u, babe."

-Alizwa: "I see u were busy. Let me not disturb u then. I'll be upstairs."

As he was leaving, he turned to KG and let out a smile, but it was pure frost. A threatening smile.

-Alizwa: "Kagiso."

-KG: "Sure, sure, bra."

He left them standing there and went upstairs. KG's eyes followed him, then went back to Sthandiwe.

-KG: "Why's he tripping?"

But before Sthandiwe could answer.

-KG: "Actually, no don't answer that. I think I know why."

-Sthandiwe: "Why?"

-KG: (chuckling) "Lack of sex. He really needs to release, his boys are now swimming to his head."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't be stupid. Does everything have to be a joke to u, Kagiso?"

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She went to the kitchen, KG on her tail. She got a vase, half-filled it water and put the flowers in.

-Sthandiwe: "Let's go upstairs, I'll show u ur bedroom."

-KG: "Maybe I should just drive home."

-Sthandiwe: "That's not going to happen. U said u were gonna sleep over and that's exactly what's gonna happen. This is my house not Al's."

-KG: "Maybe sleeping over was a bad idea from the beginning. I have an early morning tomorrow."

-Sthandiwe: "Early morning? Where do u work again? U didn't tell me, did u?"

-KG: "Of course I told u yesterday at the tavern. U also told me that u're now a lecturer. But clearly u were too wasted."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess. I don't remember shit."

-KG: "Jobs are scarce, dude. I still haven't gotten the right job for my qualifications. Right now, I'm just a clerk at one of the high schools around Palmridge."

-Sthandiwe: (sigh) "Yeah, hey. U can say that again. Jobs are scarce."

-KG: "Yoh, dude, it's really tough. I'm still living at home because I can't afford an apartment. I haven't paid my car installment for the past two months. And I'm the man of the house so I have to assist MaKhumalo with my younger siblings. I gotta help provide for them. 'Cause the money she makes at Home Affairs is not enough for everything."

Home Affairs? Did he just say that? Yes, he did. Sthandiwe had forgotten that she worked there. Bells started ringing in her head. An idea forming. She was no longer hearing what KG was saying. Until he brought her back to earth by passing his hand in front of her eyes.

-KG: "Are u even listening to me? What's up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh sorry, u were saying?"

-KG: "U're weird, u know that? Dating that cheese boy upstairs has turned u into a weirdo, I tell u."

-Sthandiwe: "Come, let's go upstairs. U'll make it to work just in time tomorrow. I did too this morning."

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She led the way upstairs and showed him the room he was going to sleep in. It was just opposite hers. She left him to settle in. But she just closed the door from the outside and leaned on it. She was worried about KG, about his financial problems. She wanted to help him out but didn't know how. She stood there thinking, then got back inside.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, KG. Do u want to make some extra cash?"

-KG: "Is that supposed to be a trick question? Who doesn't?"

-Sthandiwe: "A yes or a no would have sufficed."

-KG: "Tsk! So where the money at?"

-Sthandiwe: "I think I've got us a gig. This coming Saturday. 18th birthday party in Melrose."

-KG: "U kidding, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nope. Look, I know it's not ur scene but it's very important to me. And I'd really appreciate it if u could do this one with me. And u'll make some good cash, I promise."

It was not going to be a paying "gig", but she had to come up with a way of giving him the money to cover his car installments without making him feel small. She couldn't just hand it to him because she knew he'd not accept it - he hated handouts. And it was also gonna be a win-win for the both of them. Doing the gig would help her redeem herself in Palesa's books. She still needed her in her life.

-KG: "When did u get to know about the gig? Didn't u say u stopped doing music?"

-Sthandiwe: "I wasn't sure if I wanted to do it or even if I could. But now I'm sure. Please come through for me."

-KG: "Fine. Can I sleep now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, goodnight."

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She left him to sleep and went to her angry boyfriend. She got in their bedroom already taking off her jacket. Alizwa was sitting on the bed, thumbing his phone. She put the jacket on the bed and sat next to him, taking off her sneakers. He was still on his phone, not uttering a word. She looked at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby?"

He put his phone aside and looked at her. All the calmness that he faked downstairs in front of KG was now gone. His deceiving eyes that are always full of love were now filled with anger. He exploded.

-Alizwa: "What the fuck was that, Sthandiwe? What's that boy doing here?"

He was now scaring her.

-Sthandiwe: "But baby, I...I've told u what KG's doing here."

-Alizwa: (shouting) "Hey, look, I'm too fuckin' old for this bullshit. Don't u fuckin' lie to me."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not lying. I called him to help me out."

-Alizwa: "Do u know that I stood at ur door step long enough to hear everything that was going on inside? And from where I was standing it sure as hell didn't sound like he was just helping u with music."

-Sthandiwe: "Al, come on, u are being ridiculous right now. We were just..."

-Alizwa: "So I don't know what I heard? Is that what u're saying? Do I look stupid to u?"

His anger levels were now sky high. He looked like he could even slap her.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'm not doing this with u, Alizwa. Not now. I'm gonna go sleep in the spare bedroom."

She said that already moving for the door. But as she was about to pull the handle, Alizwa grabbed her arm and pinned her around, pinning her to the door. His moves were fast but nonviolent.

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry. Please don't walk out on me."

He was now frantic, regretting his actions. He got closer and put his forehead on hers, eyes closed. Holding both her hands.

-Alizwa: (low tone) "I'm sorry for overreacting, babe. I'm not that kind of guy. I'm really sorry."

She pushed him away from her. But he came closer again and cupped her face, his eyes engaged hers. Gosh, they were back to the way she knew them. Clear, sincere and loving. She wanted to push him away again and walk out but she couldn't. His eyes were like magnet. She stood there, unable to move or even to look away. Smitten. Chained. Paralysed. The effect he had on her. For a long moment he held her, their eyes locked. Her own eyes were now sending him a sign he understood. They were begging him to kiss her. He leaned in and kissed her lips, softly. Then slowly moved to kiss her neck.

-Alizwa: (whispering) "I love u."

She could feel his hot breath on her skin, sending shivers down her spine, making her weak on her knees. He moved to her lips again. He kissed her and she responded, slowly at first. But the kiss got heated too quickly, her tongue hungrily found his. She began to unbutton his shirt, then ripped it open in frustration, kissing his chest. He yanked her up into his arms and carried her to the bed.

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She crashed into the bed but was up in an instant to undo his pants. They quickly undressed each other. He got on top of her and continued kissing her, slowing the pace now. He went to nibble her ear, she could feel her other four senses stop functioning. Everything was now concentrated on her sense of touch. She was starting to moan in pleasure. He went down bit by bit; his moist, soft lips planting wet kisses all over her sexy body. He continued down until he reached his thighs, slowly kissing them. He gently spread her legs apart and kissed his inner thighs. And before she knew it, his moist tongue had found its way into her honey pot. She gasped. Losing her mind as his tongue did it's magic. Sending her over the moon and beyond pluto. He was really good at that, she came three times before he stopped and moved up to kiss her lips. Her whole body was now trembling, she was ready to feel him inside her, gosh she'd been yearning for that for days. But he still kept his slow pace, working her body, sucking her nipples. She was now begging him to penetrate her. But still, he was in no rush. He eventually penetrated her, slowly. She tensed. Then slowly allowed him to pick up the pace. Their naked bodies writhed in unleashed lust. She was now crying in pleasure and sweet pain as he was riding forward like a charging warrior. He continued pounding her in rhythmic succession and her cries were now rising to a crescendo. It was a long one. They finished and laid entwined. Lovers whose last drop of passion had been spent on the other.

Insert #22 Continuation.

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Sthandiwe wanted to mend bridges between her and her friends, the people who cared about her. She wanted to do right by them, be there for them. Because she didn't know when or how soon she would need them. The feeling she had the day before of being alone when she needed someone was the worst feeling ever, and she didn't want to go through that again. She got to see the importance of friends in her life. And she was hoping to fix things with Palesa as well.

She got to her office, got her class material and went to conduct her classes. After the last one, she didn't stick around campus, she went home.

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She got home around 13:30. And as soon as she parked in the driveway, a Sprinter pulled up behind her. She got out of her car and went to see who it was. KG got out, with four other guys.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey guys."

They greeted back.

-KG: "This is a band from my hood in Palmridge. We're gonna be working with them in tomorrow's gig."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh?"

-KG: "Yeah. U said the gig's important to u. So let's make it lit."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, great. Fantastic. Welcome guys. Let's get this ball rolling then."

One guy was a keyboard player, the other a drummer and the other two were guitarists. Sthandiwe knew she had to pay all of them with her own money, but she didn't mind - it was for a good cause. They got their equipment out of the car and into the house. Sthandiwe ordered some pizza as they were getting set in the music room. Then she went to her bedroom to change. She put on sweatpants, an oversized Adidas sweatshirt and Nike sneakers. The pizza got delivered and she took it to the music room. She now didn't have a problem entering the room ever since she went in there with Alizwa that night. They ate then started working. Around 17:00, she went to buy some takeout food and a dozen of energy drinks for them. She got back, and they all took a break and ate. Chatting up a storm. Laughing. They were all enjoying each other's company, they just clicked. After eating, they got back to the business. And Sthandiwe had fun working with them.

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Around 20:00, Alizwa called her, from his bedroom. But her phone just kept ringing, unanswered. She wasn't hearing it, busy with the guys. He called 3 times but she didn't pick up. He threw the phone on the bed, in frustration. Then he sat down, buried his face in his hands and took a deep sigh. Moments passed with him sitting like that, until Reneé came in from work.

-Reneé: "Hey, babe."

He looked up.

-Alizwa: "Hey."

-Reneé: (noticing the state he was in) "Are u okay?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah, I'm fine."

-Reneé: "Al, u don't look fine. Talk to me. What's going on?"

Alizwa: "There's a new guy in Thandi's life and I think..."

-Reneé: (interrupting) "Sthandiwe."

-Alizwa: "Huh?"

-Reneé: "Her name is Sthandiwe not Thandi."

-Alizwa: "Isn't that the same thing?"

Reneé gave him a look.

-Alizwa: "Anyway, as I was saying, the guy's gonna be a problem for us."

-Reneé: "What is he to her? Another boyfriend?"

-Alizwa: "She says he's just a friend. I'm not sure if I buy that though. I mean, she spent the night at his place the night before last. The guy could jeopardise our plan, Reneé, and we can't let that happen. But I already asked Ted to check him out. We have to know who we're dealing with before we come up with a plan of action."

-Reneé: "In order for this to work u have to be the only one in her life. I thought u were making progress. Whats going on now? We can't let some guy come out of nowhere and derail our plan. We'll have to get rid of him."

Alizwa gave her a look.

-Alizwa: "Get rid of him?"

-Reneé: "Don't give me that look. There are so many ways of getting someone out of the way without getting things messy. Like we did with Chris Motaung. Find one's weaknesses and just exploit them. Get them to work to ur advantage. Easy."

-Alizwa: "Ri-ght."

He took his phone and made his way to the door.

-Reneé: "And now? Where are u going?"

-Alizwa: "I need to get some air."

He walked out and left her there, amazed.

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Sthandiwe and the boys practised until after midnight. Then they all went to sleep. The house has only 3 bedrooms so KG had to share a room with the keyboard player. Then the drummer and the two guitarists shared another room. Sthandiwe went to her room too and dozed off without even checking her phone.

Insert #22

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Alizwa and Sthandiwe were curled into the classic "spoon" position, deep asleep beneath a pillowy down comforter, when the alarm for her morning jog beeped. Her eyes popped open. She rolled away and scrambled to turn it off. She checked Alizwa, he was still asleep. She got out of bed, careful not to awaken him. She went to the closet, got a robe out, slipped it on and moved for the door. She went to wake up KG so he wouldn't be late for work as he was still going to have to drive to Palmridge. She knocked on his door but there was no answer. She pushed the door open and peeped inside. He was gone and the bed was made with its duvet. She trotted down the stairs to check if he was really gone. And she got relieved when she found him in the living room folding the blankets he used. He had slept on the couch.

-Sthandiwe: "Good morning."

-KG: "Morning."

Sthandiwe: "U slept here? Why though?"

-KG: "What do u think?"

She just cleared her throat, embarrassed.

-KG: "Fight just to make up, huh."

-Sthandiwe: "What?"

-KG: "I'm talking about u and ur guy upstairs. One minute u were fighting, the next u were fucking."

-Sthandiwe: "Look, I'm sorry u had to hear all that."

-KG: "I just couldn't take it. That's why I came to sleep down here. Geez! I said he should release, I didn't say he should empty the entire reservoir in one night."

He said the last sentence laughing. Then he grabbed the garage door remote and his car keys on the coffee table and made his way to the front door.

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She followed him outside. He opened the garage and went to get his car. He reversed out to the driveway and parked next to Alizwa's car. He slipped out and went to Sthandiwe who was now standing there folding her arms.

-KG: "If he hurts u in anyway, let me, ur only brother know. Okay? I'll show him how we deal with jerks ko kasi [in the ghetto]. "

Sthandiwe just laughed.

-KG: "I know I like joking, but right now I'm serious. I didn't like what I saw in his eyes last night."

Sthandiwe smiled and nodded. She liked having her overprotective friend/brother back.

-Sthandiwe: "I'll sure tell u."

She hugged him.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you."

-KG: "I love YOU."

They broke the hug and he got back inside his car. He started the engine but rolled down the window as he was about to back out the driveway.

-KG: "Hey, were u serious about that gig?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I was."

-KG: "Okay then I'll do it but only because u said it's important to u. And u better leave work early today because it is tomorrow. So we only have today to put something together. I'll be here around 13:00 hours."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, no problem. See ya later."

He backed out to the street and motored south.

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Sthandiwe returned inside the house, and to the bedroom. She found Alizwa still asleep. He looked so peaceful and she didn't want to wake him. She got dressed for her jog and went running. When she got back, Alizwa was still out. Still she let him be, she was gonna wake him up after she had finished taking a shower. She stripped off her jogging clothes and went inside the bathroom to take the shower. But she changed her mind, she put on a robe that was in the bathroom and went to wake him up.

She found him out of bed, putting on his boxers. She approached him from behind, cupped his eyes and laughed. He gently removed her hands, turned around and kissed her.

-Alizwa: "Morning, sweetheart."

-Sthandiwe: "Morning. Come join me in the shower."

She said that already taking his hand, leading him towards the en-suite bathroom. But in the doorway he stopped.

-Alizwa: "Ummh, no, we're gonna be late for work. Lemme go shower in the other bathroom."

But Sthandiwe came closer and kissed him. He tried to respond, but couldn't. Then:

-Alizwa: "Is there something going on between u and that Kagiso guy?"

The question caused a quake somewhere deep inside her but she concealed it. She didn't want to fight, not now.

-Sthandiwe: "No. I told u that he's a friend and yesterday he was just helping me with music."

-Alizwa: "Thought I was the one doing that."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, I just didn't wanna burden u. I know that u're busy."

-Alizwa: "Where's he now?"

-Sthandiwe: "He's already left. He gotta go to work."

-Alizwa: "Look, babe, I'm not gonna lie to u and say I like the fact that u let him spend the night here. I didn't like it, still don't, but I didn't want our fight to escalate last night. I don't like fighting with u."

-Sthandiwe: "Al, seriously, don't u think u should get ur jealousy in check? I mean, if me and KG had something going on, don't u think last night would have turned out differently? No one was gonna be calm here. And he definitely wouldn't have spent the night here. Not with u in the house."

-Alizwa: "Okay, let's drop it."

He kissed her.

-Alizwa: "Let me go take that shower."

She was disappointed that he didn't want to join her but she released him anyway and went to turn on the water in the shower. But when she turned, she noticed that he was still standing in the doorway, leaning on the door. She returned to him.

-Sthandiwe: "U sure u don't wanna join me?"

She said that kissing him. She really wanted repeat of the previous night, but he stopped her.

-Alizwa: "Trust me, I want to but I don't wanna be late for work. I have a class at 8."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. Have it ur way then."

She took several steps toward the shower, then spinned and loosened the robe tie.

-Sthandiwe: "Just so u know what u're missing."

The robe fell to the floor. She smiled alluringly. Alizwa remained rooted in that spot, taking in her sexy, naked body. But as difficult as it was, he had to be tough and resist. Even the previous night wasn't meant to happen. He didn't want to sleep with her but he did what he had to do to control the situation.

Seeing that he wasn't coming to get her, Sthandiwe turned and walked inside the shower. She closed the shower door and that's only then that Alizwa managed to retreat from the bathroom. He went back to the bedroom, put on his shirt then went to get his bag from the car. Then went to take the shower in the guest bathroom. They both finished and returned to the bedroom to get dressed.

She went to the closet to take out what she was gonna wear. And noticed that navy jacket, Alizwa's, still there on a hanger.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, I keep forgetting to give u ur jacket back."

She said that taking it out, handing it to him.

-Alizwa: "I ain't taking that until u accept the dress I bought u. I still have it."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, fine, I'll accept it. But in the meantime take this."

He reluctantly took it. They got dressed and left for work.

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She got to her office and immediately called Sihle to check for an update.

-Sihle: "Hey."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey chomi. Any updates?"

-Sihle: (chuckling) "U kidding, right? U only gave me the assignment last night, babe."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, u're right, I'm putting pressure on u. I'm sorry, it's just that I can't wait to get everything on him."

-Sihle: "Don't worry, I'll get something worth reporting soon. And when I do, I'll be the one to call u, no need to call me."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, chomi. And oh, one more thing. Did the Motaung's find the performing act for Lerato's birthday party?"

Lerato is Palesa's sister.

-Sihle: "Nope."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. I'm gonna do it."

Sihle was happy to hear that and she also told her that Chris wasn't gonna be there. That was a relief to Sthandiwe because having him there was gonna be awkward.

After she hung up, she still couldn't help but be curious and want to know more about Al. She wasn't going to act until she had all the evidence proving that he was playing her. And deep down, she hoped and prayed that Sihle wouldn't find anything unpleasant about him. Because even though what she felt for him when they first got together was lust and just wanted him to be her distraction from Chris, she had now completely fallen in love with him.

She sat there, rocking her chair, until she decided to go to inquire about him from Prof Jansen. Alizwa had told her more than once that he and Prof know each other.

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She knocked on Prof's open door.

-Prof Jansen: "Blie, come on in, my dear."

Prof Jansen is a warm, 55 year old, white man.

-Sthandiwe: "Good morning, Prof."

-Prof Jansen: "It will be good only if u tell me that u have considered being part of my latest project."

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh...I'm still thinking about it, Prof. But in the meantime, there's something else I'd like to ask u. That's if u don't mind, of course."

-Prof Jansen: "Questions never kill anyone. Ask away, my dear."

She didn't waste time beating about the bush, she went straight to the point.

-Sthandiwe: "Do u know Doctor Alizwa Zakhe?"

-Prof Jansen: "Only on a professional level. Why do u ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "So u don't know anything about his personal life."

-Prof Jansen: "No. Only got to know him last year. We met in a seminar. What's with all these questions?"

-Sthandiwe: "Thank u, Prof. That'd be all."

She walked out, leaving Prof Jansen perplexed. On her way to her office, she found Xolisa leaning on the desk in the open lab. His face buried in his hands.

-Sthandiwe: "XO, are u okay?"

He raised his head and looked at her.

-Xolisa: "Hey. Yeah, I'm fine. Just pissed about the damn bacteria."

-Sthandiwe: "Bacteria?"

-Xolisa: "Yeah. I can't get the strains I need for my experiments."

-Sthandiwe: "Is that why u look this stressed? Uh come on, fix that face. Just send me the list and I'll get the 'damn' bacteria for you. I've got contacts and one of them is a microbiologist."

-Xolisa: "U'd really do that for me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course. Look, Xolisa, u've always been nice and kind to me, but I never returned that kind of treatment. And yesterday u showed me, once more, that u've got my back. Hell, it's about time I do the same for u too. Buddy, I promise that from today onwards I'll treat u better and u can count on me, always. I got u. Okay?"

Xolisa smiled.

-Xolisa: "I'm happy to hear u say that."

They shared a brief hug.

-Xolisa: "So what are u gonna about him? Alizwa.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't wanna talk about him."

The question just pushed her away. She started to walk away.

-Sthandiwe: "Make sure to send me that list, okay?"

-Xolisa: "Cool."

She walked into her office.

Insert #23

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After he left his house that night, Alizwa drove to Sthandiwe's house but when he got there he saw that Sprinter minibus parked in the driveway and he could also hear the sound of their music coming from upstairs. He knew right then that KG was there, so he didn't even get out of his car, he just drove off. He called Ted, his white, 30-something PI, and they met up outside his home in Melville. He came to meet him in his car.

-Alizwa: "His name is Kagiso Phiri. Stays in Palmridge. Don't know where exactly in Palmridge, u'll have to figure that one out. I want to know everything about this guy, Ted. But most importantly, I want to know what his relationship is with Thandi. Ur starting point would be her house, he's there as we speak and I'm sure he's spending the night."

-Ted: "Consider it done."

But he kept his gaze on Alizwa as if wanting to say something.

-Alizwa: "If u have something to say, now's the time."

-Ted: "It's nothing. It's none of my business anyway."

-Alizwa: "Don't fuck with me, man."

-Ted: "Are u falling for the girl?"

-Alizwa: "What girl?"

-Ted: "The girl. Sthandiwe."

-Alizwa: "One: she's not a girl, she's a woman. Two: u were right, it's none of ur business. Three: don't slam my door on ur way out."

Ted got the message. He got out of the car and left. Alizwa sat there, head resting against the steering wheel. Reneé kept calling him but he didn't answer, he just drove off to the apartment in Rosebank and slept there that night.

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The following morning, Sthandiwe, got woken up by her alarm. She was still drunk with fatigue but she had to wake up and follow her Saturday routine that she seldom breaks. But she was gonna have to break the last part of it that day, she wasn't gonna get a chance to go do her volunteering work in Soweto because of the party she had to attend.

She got out of bed and made it. Then she checked her phone and saw the 3 missed calls from Alizwa and an email from Xolisa with the list of the bacterial strains he needed. She called Alizwa back and he answered with a groggy voice, suggesting he was still sleeping.

-Alizwa: "Hey."

-Sthandiwe: "Morning, babe. I'm sorry for waking u."

-Alizwa: "No, it's okay, babe. I dont mind."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry I didn't take ur calls last night. I didn't hear the phone ring, I was busy with the band trying to put something together for Palesa's sister's birthday party. It's today, so we were under pressure and had to work all night."

-Alizwa: "Oh, u doing the gig?"

-Sthandiwe: "U said I should. I took ur advice."

Of course that was just her way of flattering him. She wasn't doing it because of what he said, even though it also made sense.

-Alizwa: "That's good. Go do ur thing then, and do it well."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, babe. Enjoy ur day."

-Alizwa: "Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, babe."

-Alizwa: "I love you."

It was not what he said but how he said it that melted Sthandiwe's heart. He said those three little words with so much passion, giving them a deeper meaning. The way he sounded, they were coming straight from the bottom of his heart. Sthandiwe let out a big smile.

-Sthandiwe: "I love u too, babe."

She hung up. Then called Sihle and asked for an update again, she just couldn't help herself, she wanted the whole thing to be over so she could know if she had a future with this guy. She wanted Sihle to take her out of her misery. But Sihle just told her that they'd talk face to face after Lerato's party. Sthandiwe reluctantly let it go. And told her that she was coming with the band to the party so she should make arrangements for them. Then hung up.

She thought to herself "If he really had a wife I doubt he would have taken my call at this hour."

She then called her microbiologist contact and the guy agreed to get her those bacterial strains.

Then she went to do her laundry. Finished and started cleaning the house. The guys were still sleeping. She finished cleaning and went to take a shower. Got dressed casually and went downstairs.

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She was welcomed by the noise of the guys in the kitchen. They were all downstairs now, seated at the breakfast table, chatting over coffee. KG was at the stove making breakfast.

-Sthandiwe: "Morning, guys."

They greeted back.

-KG: "Breakfast will be served now now, my lady."

-Sthandiwe: "Awww! Rea leboga [Awww! Thank u]. It's good to see u all awake, finally."

-The Drummer: "U are such a slave driver. I'm still exhausted."

He, however, said that with a smile.

-The guitarist: "I still can't believe that we managed to learn and do two songs in just hours. That was a first for us."

They all applauded themselves. KG plated for them and they started eating.

-Sthandiwe: "Sihle said the party starts at 15:00 but we gotta be there at 14:00 to set up."

-KG: "Go siame [okay], but we still need to go to Palmridge first, to freshen up and everything. We'll leave everything here and just take the minibus."

-Sthandiwe: "That's okay. I also need to visit the cemetery first."

The doorbell rang. She got up and went to open it. It was her florist. She handed Sthandiwe her white lilies and something in a gift box from her upscale gift shop. Sthandiwe had asked her to bring it for her since she couldn't get time to go to her shop. It was a birthday gift for Lerato. She also gave her an invoice then left.

Sthandiwe went back to sit with the guys. They all finished their breakfast and the guys were ready to leave. Sthandiwe followed them outside.

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As they got outside to the driveway, there was a white Lexus parked across the street but they didn't pay it much attention. Whoever was inside, watched the four guys getting inside the bus and KG giving Sthandiwe a hug and a kiss on the cheek before hopping into the minibus.

The minibus left and the Lexus followed it, but they didn't even notice it.

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Sthandiwe took the flowers to the cemetery and came back. Moments later the guys arrived and they took their equipment into their modified-for-a-

band Sprinter minibus. And they left for Melrose. They got there and parked in front of the gate. Sthandiwe took the gift and got out first, instructing the guys to remain in the car. She went through the gate and to the backyard where the party was gonna be at. It was buzzing with activity. Everything was already set. An endless buffet attended by several wait staff was set up under an expansive tent. There was also a big stage, and the DJ was set in the corner, already doing his thing. On a dance floor laid over the lawn, teenagers held sway, dancing, flirting. Off to the side, people were lining up to leave their gifts, which were being neatly organised into a small mountain by the party planner. Sthandiwe ignored the line when she spotted Lerato, the birthday girl. She was off to the side surrounded by her friends.

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Sthandiwe was still walking up to her when she heard Palesa's voice behind her.

-Palesa: "What are u doing here, Sthandiwe?"

Sthandiwe turned and looked at her.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Lisa. I just want to give Rato her gift."

-Palesa: "Didn't I tell u to keep ur distance from us?"

Sihle came to her rescue.

-Sihle: "Lisa, please, she's just trying to do something nice for Rato. Rato wanted live music, remember? So Sthandiwe is gonna do it. She came with the entire band. Just let her do this one thing for Rato, please."

-Palesa: "Oh, Sihle, u knew about this and didn't tell me? That's why u wanted a bigger stage at the last minute."

-Sihle: "I'm sorry, chomi. I just..."

Lerato came to them.

-Lerato: (with a smile) "Hey, sis Thandi, u came."

Lerato was staying at a boarding school and she didn't know anything about the drama between Sthandiwe and her siblings.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, sweetheart. Happy birthday."

She handed her the box.

-Lerato: (hugging her) "Thanks."

-Palesa: "Can't u see where other people are putting their gifts?"

But Lerato was excited.

-Lerato: "It's heavy. What is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's the MacBook u've always wanted."

-Lerato: "OMG! Really? Thank u so so much, sis Thandi."

She hugged her again. Palesa just rolled her eyes, irked.

-Sihle: "There's more, Rato. She came with the band, she's gonna be singing."

-Lerato: (excited) "Really? Oh my, I wanted live music. Sis Thandi, u are the best. Lemme go tell my friends."

She left.

-Palesa: (to Thandi) "Fine u can stay. For Rato."

The party planner arrived to them.

-Planner: "The photographer has finally sent me a message saying he won't make it personally because something came up but he's sending someone else and he'd be here any minute from now."

-Palesa: "Fine. As long as we're gonna get the photos, I don't care who takes them."

She dragged Sthandiwe off to the side, just as Ted was arriving as the photographer.

Insert #24

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Palesa dragged Sthandiwe to a quiet corner, away from the crowd.

-Palesa: "Look, I appreciate what u're doing for Rato. But think about it, Sthandiwe. What if Chris was here? How do u think he was gonna feel?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know, it was gonna be awkward but I heard that he wasn't coming so yeah I came."

-Palesa: "Thandi, I don't want Chris to undergo what he went through 18 months ago. He was in a very dark place, and we almost lost him. I don't want my brother to go back there again."

-Sthandiwe: "What happened 18 months ago?"

-Palesa: "His long term girlfriend left him for another guy and he didn't take it too well. Even got suicidal. Funny, for a living he helps people deal with their problems but when it came to helping himself he couldn't. He didn't want to see any therapist. Fucking irony, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "God, I didn't know any of this, Lisa. Why didn't u tell me?"

-Palesa: "It's a family matter, I didn't have to tell u."

-Sthandiwe: "But u did tell him about my past relationships. Did u have to do that? That wasn't a nice thing to do, Palesa. And it hurt."

-Palesa: "Look, I don't want us to argue or fight, not now. This is Rato's day, let's not ruin it. Please, go get ur band and set up, we are about to start."

Sthandiwe left to get the guys. They set up on stage and the party started.

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When their time to take the stage came, they did their thing. She and KG performed the first song together, it was more of a dance song, her father wrote it for her on her 21st birthday. The second one was a song she and KG wrote together in varsity. She sang and KG had rap verses. The band guys handled the instruments. She and KG created chemistry on that stage just like old times. And Ted was taking pictures. When they were done, the crowd still wanted more. But they had prepared only two songs. However, the crowd kept begging. So Sthandiwe ended up delivering her own rendition of Usher's "Crash", alone. She played the keyboard for herself and sang. She was lost in the song, singing it from the heart, not looking at the crowd. She only looked up when she was done and her eyes met Chris'. He was standing off to the side, watching her. Oh my, the shock. He wasn't supposed to be there. Their eyes locked for what felt like forever, until Chris turned and walked inside the house. Sthandiwe ran after him. She bumped onto Ted but didn't even apologise, all she wanted was to get to Chris. Ted followed her inside, sneakily.

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She found Chris in the kitchen drinking water right from the faucet. She stopped behind him.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris."

Chris closed the faucet but didn't turn to look at her. He spoke calmly.

-Chris: "I didn't know u were gonna be here."

-Sthandiwe: "I too didn't know that u were gonna be here."

-Chris: "I couldn't miss my lil sister's birthday."

-Sthandiwe: "Could u please turn around and look at me? We need to talk."

-Chris: "About?"

Ted was in the hallway, just around the corner, listening in on their conversation.

-Sthandiwe: "I still want to apologise. Chris, believe me, I never meant to hurt u. I never meant to break ur heart. I did what I did because I thought u were cheating on me."

-Chris: "Oh, so that's u justifying ur actions?"

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, I had caught u with another woman, kissing. What was I supposed to think?"

Chris finally turned and looked at her.

-Chris: "U were supposed to give me a chance to explain, Thandi. U were supposed to give me the benefit of the doubt before jumping into another man's bed. That's what a sane, mature person was gonna do."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, Chris. Okay? I really am. I know that what I did is..."

-Chris: (interrupting; with a cold smile) "It doesn't matter now, MamTshawe. It's done and there's no undoing it. I have forgiven u. Take care of urself."

And with that, he left her standing there, still absorbing his words.

She couldn't believe he just did that. She couldn't believe how calm he was. She didn't know what she expected, but she sure as hell didn't expect him to be that cold. She didn't want to get back together but still that's not the reaction she expected from him.

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She rushed out to the backyard to get Sihle. She couldn't wait for the party to be over before she could hear what Sihle had found about Alizwa, the man she had chosen over Chris. She wanted to know if she didn't make a mistake by doing so. Sihle took her hand and they walked back inside the house. She went to get her bag from Palesa's room and went with Sthandiwe to their minibus. She took out a file from her bag and handed it to Sthandiwe.

-Sihle: "Everything I have found so far is in there. And since u didn't tell me what u wanted to know specifically, I have included everything in that file."

-Sthandiwe: "Break it down for me, quickly."

-Sihle: "35. From Queenstown. Parents are both deceased. Was an only child. But two years ago he found out that he has a half-sister. The sister lives in Pretoria..."

-Sthandiwe: "Wait. Wait. Pretoria? Are u sure? Doesn't she live with him in his apartment in Rosebank?"

-Sihle: "Nope. She's been living in Pretoria for the past 4 years. He does have an apartment building in Rosebank though."

-Sthandiwe: "An apartment. He has an apartment in Rosebank, not an apartment building."

-Sihle: "It's an apartment building, sweetie. The apartment he uses when he's in Rosebank is actually in the apartment building he owns. Actually, the apartment was in his wife's name up until 2 months ago."

-Sthandiwe: "Wife?"

-Sihle: "Yeah. Reneé Parker. Daughter of..."

-Sthandiwe: "Anthony Parker. I know."

She buried her face in her hands. Hard to swallow what she was hearing. It was a punch of lie after another.

-Sthandiwe: "Are u sure they are still married, not divorced? Didn't she file for a divorce 2 years ago?"

-Sihle: "Not that I know of. From what I've gathered, two years ago he was still very much happily married. Just give me more time and I'll find out more."

Sthandiwe was running out of breath, felt a sharp pain like she was being stabbed right in her tummy.

-Sihle: "Are u okay? And why are u looking into this guy? Is he the guy u're seeing?"

Sthandiwe caught her breath and looked at Sihle.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not seeing him. And please, not a word about this to Palesa."

-Sihle: "U don't have to worry about that. I won't say a word. But I want u to be okay, I don't want to see u hurt, chomi. So please, talk to me. I'm still ur friend."

-Sthandiwe: "Could u please leave? I need to be alone."

Sihle looked at her then decided she should leave her alone. She got out of the vehicle and left, just as KG was coming in.

-KG: "ST, are u okay?"

Sthandiwe: "Go get the guys, we need to get out of here. And I'm going to Palmridge with u guys."

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KG called the guys, they came and they all left. Sthandiwe was sitting in the front seat, the guys were at the back and KG was driving. She was leaning back on the chair, eyes closed, thinking about all the lies Alizwa had told. But she still wanted to be sure before she could act. The guys were chatting and laughing but she was in her own world.

She only got to open her eyes when they were already passing Mulbarton. She sat up straight but didn't say a word to the guys. When they were passing Mall of the South she could see a black Jeep on their tail, noticing it from the mirrors. She had noticed the car behind them when she first opened her eyes in Mulbarton. It kept some distance but it wasn't passing. She brushed the whole thing off as saying she was just being paranoid. But when they were approaching the robots between Thokoza and Eden Park, still on the M7, the car was still behind them.

-Sthandiwe: "KG, what are the mirrors for? Aren't u seeing what I'm seeing?"

-KG: "What are u seeing?"

-Sthandiwe: "That black Jeep has been following us. I first noticed it when we were passing Panorama Shopping Centre and it is still on our tail."

-KG: "Come on, how do u know that it's following us? Besides, who would follow us? And why?"

-Sthandiwe: "Look, I rolled with my dad long enough to know when I'm being followed, even when someone is trying not to be obvious."

-KG: "Then, at the robots I'm gonna turn right and drive through Eden Park. If they turn too then we'll know for sure that they are following us."

Indeed at the robots he turned. But the Jeep proceeded down M7.

-KG: "See? Paranoia. The car wasn't following us."

Sthandiwe sighed, relieved. But when they got to Palmridge, at KG's place, the Jeep was parked three houses down, at the end of the street. Sthandiwe noticed it but didn't want to say anything to the guys. She just memorised it's registration number. She and KG got out of the minibus and the drummer took over the wheel and they drove off. KG and Sthandiwe stepped inside KG's yard.

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They went to the house and found MaKhumalo in the kitchen, cooking.

-Sthandiwe: "Sawubona, Ma. [Hello, Ma]"

MaKhumalo turned to her with a smile.

-MaKhumalo: "Hey, baby. How are u?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm fine, Ma. And I can see that u're also fine."

-MaKhumalo: "I'm always fine, baby. Are u staying for dinner?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sure. U know I used to love ur cooking. Can I help out?"

-MaKhumalo: "No. I'm already done. Just sit here with me and catch up on gossip. It's good to have a female in this house."

-KG: "Okay, let me leave u two to catch up. I'll be in the lounge with my lil bros."

KG walked out. Sthandiwe came closer to MaKhumalo.

-Sthandiwe: "Ma, can I ask u for a favour?"

-MaKhumalo: "What kind of favour?"

-Sthandiwe: "The illegal kind. Could u please check someone's marital status from the Home Affairs database for me? I tried to check it online on the site but it's not working."

-MaKhumalo: "U were right, giving out someone's information without their permission is illegal. Who's this person anyway?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just someone I don't trust. Please, MaKhumalo, u'll be compensated for ur trouble."

-MaKhumalo: "Okay, I'll do it for u. Only because it's u and because u've asked nicely. U'll have to give me their ID number."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure thing, I saved it on my phone. Thank u, Ma, for doing this for me. I owe u."

Sthandiwe had checked Alizwa's ID in his wallet the last time he had slept in her house, when she was still sleeping and she was up for a jog.

Insert #25...Unedited

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In the morning, around 09:00, MaKhumalo walked Sthandiwe to take a taxi to Jo'burg. She got to Jo'burg and took another one to Auckland Park. She got home and called her contact at the Traffic Department, a guy that was friends with her father. She asked him to run that Jeep's registration number for her, because she wanted to know who was following them. The guy gave her the "I can't release that kind of information to u, it's against the law" crap, but he ended up agreeing to do it. The mentioning of cash was an incentive. But he was only going to do it on Monday as it was Sunday that day. On Monday she was also going to get to know Alizwa's marital status from MaKhumalo. She could just ask Alizwa for their final divorce decree but if he was the liar that he seemed to be she didn't trust that he wouldn't just show her a bogus decree. So she decided to wait to hear from MaKhumalo instead.

She was starting to read the full report from Sihle when Alizwa called her. She answered, hesitantly. She didn't feel like talking to him, but she tried to act normal, not wanting to let him notice that he was onto him. And the fact that later that day he was going to fly down to Durban for the 3 day seminar, starting on Monday until Wednesday, was a relief to her because she wasn't going to see him and be forced to

pretend. And by the time he comes back she would have already gotten all the answers and know exactly what to do.

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After the call to Sthandiwe, Alizwa called Ted to meet him at his Rosebank apartment for an update. He had slept there again the previous night, and told Reneé that he wanted a more quiet space to work on his seminar presentation. But that wasn't the case.

Ted got there and they sat on the high chairs in the kitchen. He gave Alizwa a file. And as he opened it he was met with a photo of KG with his arm around Sthandiwe's waist. Then another of them hugging and him planting a kiss on her cheek. They were the photos taken the day before when KG was about to hop into the Sprinter.

-Ted: "That was yesterday. Out of the five band members that were there, my guy identified this guy as Kagiso. Body language and through my facial recognition software. Since u didn't provide me with his photo."

-Alizwa: "Yeah, this is Kagiso."

-Ted: "After they left Sthandiwe's house, my guy followed them to Palmridge and he got to see his address when the bus dropped him off at his house. He lives with his mother and two little brothers. No father. And money's tight. U can use that to ur advantage if need be. But I don't think u'd need to..."

-Alizwa: (interrupting) "Just skip to the part where u tell me about his relationship with Thandi."

-Ted: "Hey, u said I should get u everything on this guy. Anyway, the two have some chemistry, they can't seem to keep their hands off each other. Especially on that stage yesterday."

In the file, he showed him photos from the party.

-Ted: "Those are from the party. I...persuaded the party's photographer, so to speak... to cancel and I went in his place. I didn't know what to make of their chemistry at first but now I do. I personally followed them to Palmridge after they left the party and I can tell u that their relationship is purely platonic."

-Alizwa: "Yeah?"

-Ted: "Yeah. Kagiso has a girlfriend. She doesn't stay far from his house. He went to pick her up on foot last night and took her home this morning. That was after his mother had walked Sthandiwe to the taxi. From the look of it, Sthandiwe slept in the main house and Kagiso sleeps in a flat at the back."

He showed him photos of KG with his pregnant girlfriend.

-Ted: "The girlfriend is pregnant. Her name is Sinegugu Nhlapo. She's been in an on-and-off relationship with Kagiso for a year now. And Kagiso, (sigh) the guy made me pull an all-nighter trying to find out more about him. He's not even on social media. But I've found out that he was doing the same course as

Sthandiwe in the same institution, around the same time. That's when they met and became friends. Also got written pieces about the both them. They were a singing duo in their varsity years, calling themselves Thunder. That's how they became friends. Just friends."

-Alizwa: "I had to be sure before I leave everything behind and risk it all for her."

Ted looked at him.

-Ted: "Huh? Are u saying what I think u're saying?"

Alizwa didn't answer he just walked to a drawer and took out his vaporiser pen (e-cigarette) and went back to sit down on his chair.

-Ted: "Al, u weren't supposed to fall for the girl. U were supposed to sweep her off her feet then take her to say "I do" in the Magistrate's office, rip her off then leave her. That was the plan."

Alizwa just kept taking drags on his vaporiser and watching the vapour leaving his mouth and to the air. What a relaxing feeling.

-Ted: "I thought u stopped smoking two years ago."

-Alizwa: "I'm just calming my nerves."

-Ted: "U're calming ur nerves because u know that u're playing with fire. Dude, u can't deliberately take the road to hell but hope to end up in heaven. It doesn't work like that"

-Alizwa: "Do u think I wanted this, Ted? Do u think I don't feel guilty about this? Dude, I didn't plan for this to happen. I didn't plan to fall for Sthandiwe. But the heart wants what it wants. There's nothing I can do about that."

-Ted: "But u do know that ur relationship with the girl is not gon' last, right? It's built on lies, and nothing built on lies ever lasts. Unless u're planning on telling her the whole truth."

-Alizwa: "I'm not."

-Ted: (chuckles) "And u think she's not gon' find out? And that u'll both walk into the sunset and live happily ever after? Don't be stupid, man."

Alizwa just kept quiet and continued smoking.

-Ted: "Speaking of, that girl Penny is gon' be a problem. She has resigned as Chris' assistant. Says it was now awkward working for him after he rejected her. And she really loves him, it was gon' be better if she didn't. And now that she's quit her job she needs more money and she threatens to run her mouth if we don't give it to her."

-Alizwa: "She's crazy, she's not getting any more money."

-Ted: "What if she talks? What do u think is gon' happen? Once Chris and Sthandiwe find out that they were both victims of manipulation, what do u think is going to happen? They will get back together, I'm telling u. Chris was at that party yesterday and they had a moment. The way they looked at each other, I tell u, there's still something there. They can tell themselves whatever they want, but there is still

something there. I've been doing this job for years to know when people are lying to themselves. Hell, I've lied to myself a lot too to know the signs."

-Alizwa: "I don't need to hear that, Ted. Not now. And as for Penny, let her run her mouth, nothing she says is gonna lead back to me. I never dealt with her, u handled everything."

-Ted: "But she's a loose end and loose ends always cause problems in the end. Hell, she's already became one the moment she demanded more money. So maybe letting her run the show won't be such a good idea."

-Alizwa: "Then do what u have to do to get rid of her. But don't let it get messy, please."

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After Ted left, Alizwa took out the box with the dress he bought for Sthandiwe from the closet. Then drove to her house. Sthandiwe was busy finishing marking the test scripts when she heard the doorbell. She went downstairs to open the door. She got irritated immediately when she saw Alizwa at her doorstep. All the lies he'd told made it hard for her to even look at him but she forced a smile and let him in. He gave her a hug and a peck on the lips.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. I didn't know u were coming."

-Alizwa: "I know u said u're busy so I won't be long. (handing her the box) I just came to give u this dress. Maybe u could wear it on Tuesday on ur graduation. I'm sorry I won't be there though, I'd still be in Durban."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, don't worry about it. It's just a graduation, nothing much. And thank u for the dress."

-Alizwa: "But do me a favour and enjoy urself on the day. Okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'll try."

-Alizwa: "I gotta go prepare. I don't wanna miss my flight."

-Sthandiwe: "Have a safe flight. And all the best with ur seminar."

-Alizwa: "Thanks, babe."

He kissed her again and left. She just threw the box on the couch and went upstairs.

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The following morning she went to work but she was anxious to hear what MaKhumalo was going to say about Alizwa. When she got to her office, Xolisa came in to thank her for the bacterial strains and to congratulate her as she was officially going to be a doctor the following day. But Sthandiwe was as

chilled as a snowpit, not into the vibe. Xolisa finally decided to leave. She went to conduct her classes without hearing anything from MaKhumalo or her contact at the Traffic Department. But just a moment after she got back in her office, MaKhumalo called. Then the guy from the Traffic Department called too. He gave her what she wanted and she wrote everything down on a piece of paper. She hung up and put the paper in her handbag. Then took her car keys and left her office. Down the corridor she met Prof Jansen.

-Prof Jansen: "Blie. Have u thought about the project?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm still thinking about it, Prof....Ummh! Can I ask u something?"

-Prof Jansen: "U're always asking weird questions lately. Yeah, ask."

-Sthandiwe: "Has Doctor Zakhe asked u anything about me? Anything at all."

-Prof Jansen: "No. Not at all."

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing about my love of live music?"

-Prof Jansen: "Under no circumstance have we ever talked about u. And I'm not even gonna bother asking why u're asking all these questions."

Another red flag right there.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh okay. Thanks Prof."

She walked away, got to her car and drove to Rosebank.

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On the way, she called Sihle and asked to meet up with her at a certain restaurant there in Rosebank. When she got there, Sihle was already waiting for her. They hugged then sat down. They just ordered drinks and got down to business.

-Sthandiwe: "Al sure is recently divorced. But I want u to find out when the divorce was filed and where it was filed. But it's obviously the Court down in Commissioner Street in Jo'burg. And while at it, please find me the lawyer that handled the divorce."

She took that piece of paper out of her bag and handed it to Sihle.

-Sthandiwe: "Then I want u to look that person up for me. Theodore Harris but goes by the short form, Ted. That's his address on that paper. I want u to find out who he is and check if he has no links to Alizwa."

She was thinking about what happened with her car on the day she met Alizwa. How he got to know about her love of live music and her favorite dish. All that without asking her or anyone who knows her. And now she was being followed. It could only be one person, Alizwa.

-Sihle: "Consider it done."

Their drinks arrived and Sthandiwe gulped down hers in frustration.

-Sihle: "Whoa! Slow down, chomi. Talk to me about this Alizwa guy. He's making u unhappy, I can see it. I mean u should be happy, it's ur graduation day tomorrow but here u are, miserable."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not miserable, I'm fine. And as for the graduation, it's nothing to be excited about really. I've graduated several times before, so it's really not a big deal."

-Sihle: "Hello, are u kidding me right now? Not everyday one gets to be a doctor. So it is a big deal. Take what u just said back."

Sthandiwe just let out a brief smile. She wasn't really excited. The only thing she was interested in was knowing what she wanted to know about Alizwa.

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Sthandiwe stood there asking herself those questions until some lady came to her and led her to one of the tables at the front. Alizwa's world went into slow motion as he watched her walk down to the front. She looked so pretty in that above-the-knee navy dress. It hugged her body so perfectly, like it was tailor made for her. Showing off her curves and her beautiful legs. She walked so gracefully in her sky-high stilleto heels until she got to her table and sat down. She looked at Alizwa, their eyes locked. He looked at her the same way he did when he put together a romantic dinner for her at her house - with nervous eyes. He let out a nervous smile, but stretched it enough to show his sparkling white teeth. Then mouthed "I'm sorry." He got up from his chair behind the piano, took the mic off its stand and went to sit on another chair on the stage and faced the crowd. It was a high chair, so he lifted one foot and put it on the footrest then looked at Sthandiwe, then to the crowd. He looked so handsome in a navy designer suit, a white T-shirt and white low-top Salvatore Ferragamo sneakers. The suit was the same one he was wearing on their first date.

What was going through Sthandiwe's head all that time was "What the hell is he doing?" Then he started talking.

-Alizwa: "Thank u for having me in this session today. Well, I'm not good at this. In my other life I'm a buttoned-up academic. But today I'm just an ordinary guy hit by cupid."

The crowd laughed.

-Alizwa: "The song I'm gonna play and sing this evening is not mine, actually. I kind of stole it from someone close to my heart. She told me that ever since she composed it she never played it for the masses but this evening I want y'all to listen to it and deliver the verdict. (he chuckled) I've never done vocals before but right now I'm gonna make a fool of myself in front of all of u and sing. U know why?"

-The crowd: "Why?"

-Alizwa: "Because I'm a man in love and y'all know what love can do to a person. It makes us do crazy things."

People in the crowd laughed, others were like "Yeah" and others were like "U can say that again". But Sthandiwe was just looking at him, shocked by what he was doing.

-Alizwa: "The song is titled 'Unconditional Love' and it was composed by the woman in my life. The woman I truly love. Ladies and gents, please give it up for Sthandiwe B."

He said that pointing to Sthandiwe. Everyone looked at her and clapped. She just let out an abbreviated smile then looked down. He was making her shy and she didn't at all expect what he was doing. He then went back to sit behind the piano, put the mic back on its stand just above the piano and started playing and singing.

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And for someone who said he sucked in vocals, he sang pretty well, so beautifully. His voice was soulful, putting meaning in every word he was singing. And Sthandiwe was just captivated, smiling from ear to ear, completely forgotten about his lies. Yeah, hearing ur piece being played and sung by someone else so beautifully is the best form of flattery in the music world. When Alizwa was done, everybody applauded and complemented him and of course the composer of the song. He took the mic off the stand and went to sit on that high chair again. He looked at Sthandiwe.

-Alizwa: "Sthandiwe Blie, I love u, baby. And I know that u love me too. But I'm not sure if u will still love me after hearing what I'm about to say. (he sighed) Baby, I have a confession to make. And I'm gonna make it in front of everybody in here."

Sthandiwe's eyes were now widened. She didn't know what he was going to say but her attention was definitely captured. She listened, wanting to hear more and so was the crowd.

-Alizwa: "The song I just sung is called 'Unconditional Love' and u wrote it because unconditional love is what u believe in, or at least I'd like to think so. And I hope to God that what u feel and have for me is exactly that - unconditional love. Because what I'm about to say is gonna shock u and possibly change everything."

He took a deep breath then continued.

-Alizwa: "When I first met u, it wasn't about love. My plan was to get close to u, earn ur trust then rip u off. My recent ex-wife and I knew about ur wealth and we wanted a piece of it so we planned everything together. But after our first date, the date we had right here in this very same place, I changed my mind.

I got to spend some time with u and in those few hours I felt like I've known u forever. I fell in love, instantly. And right now, I'm telling u that I have abandoned that plan and I am all for u."

Everyone in there, including Sthandiwe, was shocked by his confession. The way she was shocked, she didn't even know what to do. She just remained in that spot, motionless. Her mind was still refusing to process what he was saying. He walked off the stage to her. He leaned against the table she was sitting in and held her hand. She didn't push him away, she just sat there like a statue.

-Alizwa: "I have completely fallen in love with u, Sthandiwe. And I know that u hate me right now and I don't blame u. But I hope that someday soon u'll be able to forgive me."

Hearing him talk about love just infuriated Sthandiwe. She felt like slapping him but she didn't want to cause a scene. So she just slowly got up from her chair and took her handbag without saying a word. The crowd was talking but she wasn't hearing a word they were saying, their voices just echoed around her as she made her way to the door. Alizwa didn't follow her, he wanted to give her space to process everything. She got out and rushed to her car. Everything he had just said in there was now really sinking in and it hurt. I mean she knew that he was a liar but she didn't know the extent of his lies. She didn't know that it was all about her fortune and that his wife was also in it.

She got inside her car and rested her head against the steering wheel. She remained like that for a moment, then sat up straight, with a thousand-yard stare. Her hands were trembling. She slowly gripped the steering wheel...tighter and tighter... until the trembling stopped. She was hurt and feeling like a fool. Alizwa's betrayal was the worst she could ever imagine. She took a deep breath then started the engine and drove home.

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She got home and went straight to her study in a hurry. She kicked off her shoes and quickly got out of that 'stupid' dress. Then took a pair of scissors on her desk and cut the it into pieces, angry.

-Sthandiwe: "Fuck, Alizwa! Fuck!"

She put the pieces in the dustbin and went to her bedroom. She put on her pyjamas and got into bed. She took her phone and called KG. But his phone just rang unanswered. On the third try, she let it ring until it reached voicemail and she left him a message.

-Sthandiwe: (into phone) "Ignoring my calls is not gonna help u, Kagiso. U still have some explaining to do. Call me back."

She hung up then called Sihle and asked what she'd found about Alizwa. But Sihle just told her to meet up with her the following day during lunch at a certain coffee shop in Rosebank. After she hung up, she took her iPod, put on the earphones and played music. She wanted to distract her mind and not think about the mess that was going on in her life. And she refused to cry. She listened to music until she fell asleep.

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In the morning, her alarm woke her up. She got out of bed and made it. She went to the bathroom, washed her face and brushed her teeth. Then put on her jogging clothes. But it was raining outside so she couldn't go jogging. She went to another room that served as a small home gym. She got into the treadmill and started her workout. Everything that happened at The Orbit was now coming back. Everything Alizwa said came crashing down on her like a ton of bricks. And she was getting angrier by the second. She kept increasing the speed of the treadmill until she reached max speed. She was running fast, thumping her feet on it as if she was trampling Alizwa - her way of making herself feel better. She kept at it until she realised how pathetic what she was doing was. She stopped the treadmill, got off and went to lean on the wall, breathing heavily. She slowly slid down the wall until she reached the floor and sat down. Every tear she refused to shed the night before was now streaming down her cheeks. They flowed like a river and she couldn't hold them back. She was deeply hurt. She sat there, crying, for what felt like forever. Until she realised that tears weren't going to pay her bills. She got up, wiped the damn tears and went to take a shower and got prepared for work. She finished and left without even eating breakfast. Her appetite was gone.

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She got to her office, sat down on her chair and started preparing for her lecture at 8:55. She was still busy with that when she heard a knock on her door. Without even looking up she answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Come in."

Alizwa walked in.

-Alizwa: "Hey."

She looked up and their eyes met. Anger instantly boiled inside of her but she didn't want to let it show. She just stared at him.

-Alizwa: "I know that I'm the last person u wanna see right now. But I'm gonna ask for just a few of minutes of ur time. I need to explain everything and apologise some more. Please."

She just kept staring at him, without saying a word. To Alizwa, that was the worst thing she could do. He wanted her to scream, shout at him or even slap him. Anything but silence.

-Alizwa: "Baby, please say something."

-Sthandiwe: "Didn't u just say u're the one who wants to talk?"

-Alizwa: "Yes, but..."

-Sthandiwe: "This is my department, my place of work, Alizwa. I don't need no drama here. So please leave."

-Alizwa: "I'm not gonna cause any drama. Just listen...please."

She got up and walked to the door. She opened it, inviting him to leave.

-Sthandiwe: "U are gonna make me late for my class."

He walked to the door, but stopped in the doorway.

-Alizwa: "I'm really sorry for everything. And I do love u, a lot."

Then he walked away. Sthandiwe closed the door and went to sit on her chair. It's only then that she exploded with anger. She threw her stapler, in rage, and it smashed the screen of her old office computer, sitting on a wall-fitted desk in the corner. But that didn't even startle her, she was still shaking with anger. The nerve of this guy.

She finally managed to calm herself down and left for her lecture. Then during lunch time she went to meet up with Sihle.

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She found Sihle waiting for her at the coffee shop. She greeted, sat down and they got down to business. Sihle handed her a file. She preferred getting answers from Sihle than listening to anything coming out of Alizwa's lying mouth.

-Sihle: "The name of the lawyer that handled the divorce is in there. The divorce was filed in Commissioner Street downtown only two months ago. It got finalised quickly because it was uncontested. They were married out of community of property without accrual. Meaning..."

-Sthandiwe: "...they didn't share assets."

-Sihle: "Yes. Reneé became a business woman before she married Alizwa. She's in the property business, two buildings in Braamfontein used for student accommodation, and two other apartment buildings here in Rosebank. And an ad agency based in Sandton. However, the agency is now on the verge of going under. It's been losing major clients, I'm not sure why though. But it's struggling. It's in debts."

-Sthandiwe: "And the debts are only Reneé's, as the company was only in her name."

-Sihle: "Yep. And she had used one of her buildings as collateral at the bank when she was borrowing money for the agency. And now that it's not making money, she was on the verge of losing the building too."

-Sthandiwe: "Let me guess, that's the building in Rosebank. The one that she gave to Alizwa."

-Sihle: "Correct. As if it was part of his divorce settlement. Even though he was supposed to get nothing from the divorce, he managed to force forfeiture of certain assets because he provided proof that Reneé was cheating on him. And that the cheating was the cause of their divorce. But I can tell u this, that was far from the truth."

-Sthandiwe: "And she didn't contest because it was their plan. Gosh! These people. They are only divorced on paper but they are still together. Isn't all of this fraud? And they wanted to rip me off too to cover their losses."

-Sihle: "How do u know that they were after ur dinero? I haven't gotten to that part yet."

-Sthandiwe: "He confessed last night."

-Sihle: "Desperate times call for desperate measures. They are drowning financially, so coming after ur fortune was the plan they came up with. Reneé's been using money from her property business to bankroll the ad agency. As a result, the property business is also taking a knock. So yah..."

-Sthandiwe: "I wonder why they chose me as the target though. And that guy Ted? What did u find on him?"

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-Sihle: "I don't know why they chose you. I mean, they could have chosen anyone but they chose you. So there must be a reason for that, I don't think you were just a random choice. And I can find out what that reason is, if you like."

-Sthandiwe: "I know I've asked but I'm not sure if I want to know. Just tell me about Ted."

-Sihle: "Ted is a PI. Alizwa and Reneé are his clients."

-Sthandiwe: "And that's how Alizwa got to know stuff about me. This Ted has been following me for a while. And I didn't see him. Why? Fuck! How could I be that stupid? My dad would be so disappointed in me right now."

-Sihle: (confused) "Your dad? Yes, you failed to notice your tail until recently but why would your dad be disappointed?"

-Sthandiwe: "I let my guard down. Anyway, you'd never understand."

Sihle decided not to ask any further questions.

-Sihle: "So yah, Ted's been following you. And I've been following him. I have surveillance pictures of him in that file."

Sthandiwe opened the file and saw Ted's pictures.

-Sthandiwe: "Wait, I've seen this guy before. He was the photographer at Rato's birthday party this past weekend."

-Sihle: "Yeah, he's the guy that replaced the original photographer at the last minute. Clearly, he was there for you, then followed you to Palmridge."

Sthandiwe was now thinking about something else.

-Sthandiwe: "But something doesn't add up here. Why would Anthony Parker's daughter be so desperate for money? I mean Anthony Parker is a famed businessman, he's loaded."

-Sihle: "How much do you know about Anthony's personal life?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing much."

-Sihle: "Well, I can tell you this much. Carrie is his second wife. He cheated on his first wife with Carrie and ultimately married her, after divorcing the first wife. Renéé is the daughter of the first wife. And her relationship with her father is not as rosy as it seems. I think she still resents him for what he did to her mother. And the fact that he's a controlling, egotistic son-of-a-bitch doesn't help either. So yeah, she got tired of living under the shadow of the mighty Anthony Parker and decided to build something of her own. Her own legacy, without any help from father dearest. And even now that she's drowning, she'd rather commit fraud than ask for help from him."

-Sthandiwe: "That's fucked up. Really. But it's got nothing to do with me. Why come after me?"

They continued talking until Sthandiwe had to go back to the office.

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After 16:30, she decided to drive to Palmridge to see KG because his phone was now off. She drove in the rain until she got there. But then thought about the compensation she had promised MaKhumalo for helping her look up Alizwa's marital status. So she drove to a small Palmridge shopping centre to get an FNB ATM. It was raining cats and dogs, that annoying rain accompanied by wind. She took her umbrella in the back seat, braced herself and got out of the car to draw the cash. There was no one at the ATM, probably because it was raining. She drew the cash and walked back to her car. But when she was about to open the door she felt a hand touching her shoulder. Her reaction was as quick as it was violent. She grabbed the hand on her shoulder and twisted the wrist. The pain dropped the owner of the hand to their knees. It was a guy wearing a hooded raincoat that concealed his face. She quickly dropped the umbrella, picked the guy up and pinned him to her car with her forearm wedged under his throat. Her moves were fast, everything happened so quickly.

-Sthandiwe: "Do you have any idea how easy it would be for me to crush your windpipe?"

-The guy: "Thandi, what the hell?"

She heard her name and that guy's voice, and pushed off him. He looked up and removed his hood, revealing that it's KG.

-Sthandiwe: "KG? What the hell were u doing? I could have hurt u. Never creep up on me like that again."

-KG: (smiling between the coughs) "If I knew that you were lady Jackie Chan I wouldn't have."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, okay? Get in the car, it's raining."

-KG: (cradling his wrist) "Where and when did you learn to do that?"

She just picked up her umbrella and got inside the car. KG got in the back seat. She started the engine.

-KG: "You do know that I came here in my car, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "You're gonna have to come pick it up later. We need to talk."

She drove off. She looked at KG in the rearview mirror, he was still cradling his wrist.

-Sthandiwe: "You need to put some ice on that as soon as we get to your place."

-KG: (smiling) "You're something else, you know that? Who did you think I was?"

She didn't answer that, she just opened the glove box and took out a tube of rub and threw it at him in the back.

-Sthandiwe: "And use that."

-KG: "So tell me..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "No. You tell me. Why did you trick me yesterday? What's your story with AI?"

KG: "There's no story. I was just coming from work when the guy showed up at my place. He asked me to make that call, saying he had put something together for you and wanted it to be a surprise. I didn't feel comfortable lying to you but he offered me some cash..."

Sthandiwe stepped on the breaks, stopping the car in the middle of the road.

-Sthandiwe: "What the hell? You accepted money from him? What is wrong with you, Kagiso?"

-KG: "Hey, don't talk to me like that. Ga ke robale le wena [I don't sleep with you]"

Sthandiwe just shook her head and drove off again.

-KG: "The guy was stupid or generous enough to give me 5Gs just for making that call. I wasn't gonna say no to that. Dude, I needed the money. Gugu had to go see a gynae and now I need to buy a new phone because the one I had is broken. Besides, the guy's your man not some stranger so I didn't see anything wrong with that."

-Sthandiwe: "You didn't see anything wrong with someone giving you so much money just for making a call? Really, KG?"

-KG: "So, what did the guy do? Did he do something u didn't like? Tell me, and I'll sort him out."

But she couldn't tell him what he did. She was extremely embarrassed by the whole thing. Being played for a fool like that.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, everything's fine. Just don't communicate with the guy again."

They got to KG's place and found MaKhumalo sitting in front of a fireplace in the lounge. Sthandiwe joined her and KG went to his back room to change into dry clothes and get some for Sthandiwe as well. Sthandiwe was left giving MaKhumalo the money. She didn't want to take it but Sthandiwe insisted that she accepts it as her token of appreciation. KG came back with his sweat pants and a hoodie and gave them to Sthandiwe. Sthandiwe went to change then came back to sit with them in front of the fire. KG put ice on his wrist. They all sat there chatting, laughing. She was completely forgotten about Alizwa's drama. Around 20:00 she left and drove home.

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When she got home, Alizwa's car was parked in her driveway.

-Sthandiwe: "Heeh! Hayi uyandiqhela nyani lo mfana [This guy's really fucking with me]"

She drove up the driveway and parked next to his car. She took her umbrella and got out. He was waiting for her in the front porch. He was wearing warm clothes but not warm enough to stand outside in the cold.

-Alizwa: "I've been waiting for you."

-Sthandiwe: "What do you want?"

-Alizwa: "I'm here to explain everything, baby. Please let's go inside and I'll tell you everything."

-Sthandiwe: "U ain't getting inside my house, Alizwa. If u have something to say, say it here."

-Alizwa: "But it's cold out here."

-Sthandiwe: "You've been standing in this cold waiting for me for God knows how long so I'm sure you can manage to stand here for a few more minutes."

He looked at her with sad, pleading eyes. But Sthandiwe was cold as ice towards him.

-Sthandiwe: "Start talking. Your divorce is only on paper, right? You're still with your wife and you just played me for a fool. I'm a stupid to you, right?"

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry and I forever will be sorry for lying to you. Yes, the divorce was just means to an end at first but now I really don't wanna be with Reneé anymore. I want to be with you, Thandi. Only you."

-Sthandiwe: "Means to an end?"

-Alizwa: "It was her way of hiding assets. She owns buildings and they are all in my name now and..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "All? Not just one?"

-Alizwa: "No, it's all of them. And divorcing her was the only way I could get to marry you."

-Sthandiwe: "Marry me? (she chuckled) A pretence marriage just to rip me off, right?"

-Alizwa: "That was the plan."

Sthandiwe was now getting angry, but she was trying to control the anger.

-Sthandiwe: "Why me? Why? And don't even think about lying to me. Tell me the truth. What did I ever do to you people?"

-Alizwa: "It's not you. It's what your father did. Remember I told you about the car accident that killed my son and paralysed my wife?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. But what's my father got to do with that?"

-Alizwa: "Everything. He's the one who passed the red light and smashed into our car."

-Sthandiwe: "What? So that's what this is about? Revenge?"

-Alizwa: "That's what we told ourselves so we could sleep with a clear conscience at night. It was just easy to justify our actions than to admit that what we were doing was selfish and wrong or that we were doing it to the wrong person. Truth is, this was just about money, getting us financial freedom. Revenge was just a justification."

-Sthandiwe: "I think I've heard enough. Now please leave my premises."

-Alizwa: "Please tell me you believe me when I say I'm sorry and that I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't. And I don't have to. Not after everything you've done. You've been lying to me for weeks, Alizwa."

-Alizwa: "If I was still lying and playing you, I wouldn't have told you all that I've told you. I've come clean because I want to start something real with you. I didn't want our relationship to be based on lies. Yes, it started as a mission but my heart found love and I can't walk away now. I won't."

He came closer until their faces were only an inch apart. He held her hands, and she didn't push him away.

-Alizwa: "I love you, thando lwam [my love]. And that is the honest truth. The thought of losing you kept me awake last night. I can't lose you. I just can't. Look, I'm not gonna lie and say I can't live without you. I can but I don't want to. I want you in my life, Thandi. I love waking up next to you, and I want to wake up next to you everyday."

He leaned in and kissed her lips. For a second there, she seemed to be responding but she changed her mind and pushed him away from her.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't ever do that again. Now please leave."

She opened the door, got inside quickly and closed it. Leaving Alizwa standing out there. She leaned on the door and took a deep what-the-fuck-did-I-just-do breath. A part of her wanted to kiss him back there but her mind wouldn't let her. "The guy betrayed you, Sthandiwe, so why would you want to kiss him and forgive him just like that?" was what was going through her mind. She still loved him despite everything. And a part of her wanted to believe his story and understand why he did what he did but it was hard.

-Alizwa: (from outside) "I'm not gonna leave here, Thandi, until you tell me that you believe me."

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Sthandiwe was still leaning on the door inside and Alizwa was in the same position outside.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna tell you what I don't mean just so you could feel better. I'm not a liar like you, Alizwa."

-Alizwa: "Just open the door and look me in the eye and tell me that you don't love me anymore."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna do that either."

-Alizwa: "Because you'd be lying and you don't want to lie. Am I right?"

He was right but she couldn't admit that.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna answer that."

-Alizwa: "Then I'm not leaving here. I'll even sleep here if it'd show you how serious I am about you, Thandi. I meant everything I've said tonight, I'm not walking away from us. Not now, not ever. If it means I have to sleep out here in this cold for you to get that then I'll do it."

-Sthandiwe: "Al, please...just go home and sleep. It's cold out there and you have to go to work in the morning."

-Alizwa: "I don't care about all that, I care about you, about us."

-Sthandiwe: "Then I'm going to sleep. You can stand there and freeze to death if you want, but just know that I'm not responsible for that."

She walked upstairs to her bedroom. Her heart wanted to let him in, not only in the house but in it as well. But her head wouldn't let her. She got to her bedroom and went straight to the en-suite bathroom and took a shower. Then went back to the bedroom, put on her PJs and got under the covers.

Alizwa kept sending her texts telling her how sorry he was and how much he loved her. She wasn't replying to any of them but they kept coming until the constant beeping just annoyed her and she decided to turn the phone off.

But still she couldn't fall asleep, everything Alizwa had said was playing in her head, especially the part of her dad killing his son. She decided to take her iPod and play some music to help her fall asleep. And in no time she dozed off.

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But just after 00:00 she got up, worried about Alizwa. She didn't know if he was still out there or what. She went to look through the window in the study to see if his car was still in the driveway and it was still there.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit, Alizwa, are you crazy? In this cold?"

She rushed downstairs to open the door. She found him still sitting there in the porch. Wide awake.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, what is wrong with you? I didn't think you'd really sit out here. It's freezing. Come on inside."

He got up and went inside without saying a word, he was just shivering. And trying to clench his teeth but they were still making that clicking sound, the upper jaw hitting the lower jaw because of the cold. Sthandiwe walked him upstairs to the guest bathroom.

-Sthandiwe: "We need to get you warm. So take a shower, everything you'll need is here. In the meantime, I'm gonna go back downstairs and make you some hot chocolate."

She left him and went downstairs. When she got to the kitchen, she gripped on the island and let it all out. She cried. Seeing Alizwa like that hurt her. Finally, she pulled herself together and made him the hot chocolate. She went back upstairs and when she got to the bathroom he was just finishing putting on his under garments.

-Sthandiwe: "How are you feeling?"

-Alizwa: "I'm okay."

-Sthandiwe: "Dammit, Al! What were you thinking?"

-Alizwa: "Ummh... that I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't ever do that to me again. Okay? People actually die from hypothermia dammit. This is not a movie."

She took him to the spare bedroom, the one opposite her own bedroom, the one KG used that other night. His hot chocolate was on the nightstand.

-Sthandiwe: "There's your hot chocolate. And if you need extra blankets, you'll find them in the wardrobe. Goodnight."

She quickly got out of there before he could say anything. She didn't want him to say something that would end up making her want to spend the night with him. She wasn't trusting herself, her heart was slowly trying to betray her. She got to her bedroom and got into bed.

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In the morning, she got woken up by her alarm. She turned it off and got out of bed. She made it then went to the window to check the weather outside. It was drizzling so she couldn't go jogging again. She

went to the bathroom and did the necessities. Then came back to the bedroom and put on leggings, a sports bra and Nike slide sandals.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and took her phone. She scrolled in her gallery until she found a picture of her father. She traced his face with her finger.

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't know, dad. I avoided knowing the details of that accident. I didn't know that you and mom got killed because you jumped red traffic lights that day. Or that a little boy died because of your negligence. But why, dad? Why did you do that? You were my hero. And now I hear this about you? I now understand why Alizwa and Reneé did what they did. You took their son away from them. Life is priceless."

She closed the photo, put the phone back on the nightstand and walked out of the bedroom. She went downstairs and walked to a door that leads to the basement of the house. She took a deep breath and opened it. She'd never been down there in 3 years. She walked down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs she reached a Japanese-style dojo. She took off her slides and stepped on the floor of the dojo barefooted. And the moment she bowed, a memory got jogged loose.

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FLASHBACK - EIGHT YEARS AGO

Sthandiwe with her father, Buyisile Blie, who was popularly known as just BB. They were both in their karate gis. BB with his third dan black belt, Sthandiwe with just a white belt. She was all sweaty, panting with her hands on her knees.

-BB: "Again!"

-Sthandiwe: "But dad I'm tired."

-BB: "You think we're playing here, Thandi?! Why am I doing this?! You think I'm doing this because I hate you? I'm doing this because I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I know that you're only trying to help me, dad. You don't have to remind me. But can't we take a break and resume later? I'm tired now."

-BB: "Did your kidnappers take a break from raping you when you asked them to? No! They didn't. If I didn't manage to rescue you in time what do you think was gonna happen? Thandi, I'm not always gonna be around to protect or rescue you, that's why you need to perfect your technique so you could protect yourself."

Sthandiwe nodded as BB assumed a fighting stance.

-BB: "Now hit me."

Sthandiwe assumed a similar stance, cautiously circling until she gave a short cry and launched a furious attack. They were both fast, fists and feet striking from every angle as Sthandiwe pressed her attack, but

BB blocked each and every blow with effortless speed. Sthandiwe's face knotted, teeth clenched, as she hurled herself at him.

-BB: "Good. Good. You need to adapt and improvise. But your weakness isn't your technique, it's your mentality. That's how those shitheads managed to get you in the first place."

He attacked her and it was like he wasn't attacking his own daughter at all. His feet and fists were everywhere, taking Sthandiwe apart. For every blow she blocked, five more hit their marks until she fell. She was panting, on her hands and knees, blood spitting from her mouth, speckling the white floor of the dojo.

-BB: "Get up!"

-Sthandiwe: "Dad, no."

-BB: "I stop being your dad when we enter this dojo. How many times must I tell you that?"

-Sthandiwe: "But I'm still your daughter, you can't attack me like this."

-BB: "That's just the thing. I won't attack you out there, your enemies will. And they won't show you any mercy because they don't give a fuck about you. That's the whole point of this. I'm attacking you like an enemy would, you also need to fight back as if you're fighting with an enemy. Now get up."

Sthandiwe was just frustrated, still unable to catch her breath.

-Sthandiwe: "You are fast and stronger."

-BB: "And you think you can't defeat me because of that? You need to get rid of that mentality and just do what you have to do."

Sthandiwe stood up, nodding slowly.

-BB: "Again!"

Their fists again flew with pneumatic speed. BB began to press her, countering blows while slipping in several stinging slaps.

-BB: "Come on, Thandi. What are you doing? You're faster than this. Don't think you are. Know you are. Just because I don't grade you doesn't mean you are not good enough. Grading is just a belt colour, it won't help you out there in the street."

Whack, he cracked her again. Her face twisted with rage as the speed of the blows rose like a drum solo.

-BB: "Come on! Stop trying to hit me and just hit me."

Wham. A single blow caught BB on the side of the head and knocked him to the floor. He rubbed his face and smiled.

-BB: "Good! That's how you're supposed to do it."

He got up and took her hand.

-BB: "Tomorrow I'm gonna teach you about surveillance. You need to be able to detect when you're under someone's surveillance. You need to be able to spot a tail. You're BB's daughter, there's no shortage of enemies out there so you need to stay alert at all times."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, dad."

-BB: "And remember, no one should know about what we're doing down here. No one should know about your capabilities."

-Sthandiwe: "I know, dad. You keep reminding me."

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Sthandiwe snapped out of the past and paced around the dojo.

-Sthandiwe: "Just yesterday morning I was feeling like I had disappointed you by letting my guard down and forgetting your teachings but right now I'm the one who's disappointed in you, dad. How could someone who protected me that much be that reckless and take a child's life? He was just a boy, dad. A boy. How could you do something like that?"

She blinked several times trying to fight back tears. She took a deep breath and went to put her slides on and left the dojo.

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As she walked down the passage to her bedroom, Alizwa was walking out of the bathroom to his bedroom, having just taken a shower, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. He looked so damn sexy.

-Alizwa: "Morning."

He said that as he came to stand in front of her. She didn't reply, she was literally drooling.

-Alizwa: "Are you just gonna stand there gawking?"

-Sthandiwe: (getting a grip of herself) "Oh. Hey."

Her heart was beating faster. She felt like jumping up to him and kiss his juicy lips, touch him, and feel his skin on hers. The effect he had on her. She just wanted him inside her right there. No talking. And he was really good in that department. Chris had nothing on him. Even though she and Alizwa hadn't done it much often, but in those two nights that they did it, oh boy it was beyond magical. He rocked her world, he knew how to work her body.

-Alizwa: "I'm really sorry for everything. And thanks for letting me in last night."

-Sthandiwe: "It's...it's okay."

She stuttered. He could read her mind, actually her actions. They were so obvious. He could see what she wanted to do.

-Alizwa: "Do you know why I always avoided making love to you?"

She didn't answer, just stared at him. The talking was taking her off the mood.

-Alizwa: "I knew that after you find out about my plan with René you'd feel not only stupid but also used, sexually. And I didn't want you to feel that way 'cause I love you. I wanted us to do it only after I have come clean about everything, so it could mean something."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, really? Then why did u initiate it that first night?"

-Alizwa: "That night wasn't about my plan with René. It was me, I wanted to do it. I had already felt the connection with you back at The Orbit, and I wanted us to connect some more on a more intimate level. René doesn't even know that I spent that night with you. I told her I was in Rosebank. And if you remember, I switched my phone off. I didn't want her to call and disturb us. That night was only about us, me and you. She didn't have to know about it."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh is that supposed to make me feel better about everything?"

-Alizwa: "That's not what I meant."

-Sthandiwe: "What about now? U still don't wanna do it?"

He came closer and cupped her face.

-Alizwa: "You have no idea how much I want to. But we can't. We still have things to sort out. I don't want you to regret it after. I don't want you to see something so good and beautiful as something dirty and wrong."

Insert #30

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-Alizwa: "Like I said, I want it to mean something."

-Sthandiwe: "I believe you still need to go to Houghton to get ready for work. So make it snappy and get outta here."

-Alizwa: "Wait, how did you...?"

He was going to ask how she knew that he lived in Houghton but he stopped himself. Sthandiwe went for the handle of the door of her bedroom, as they were standing in the passage just between their opposite rooms. Alizwa looked at her with a curious look, then:

-Alizwa: "Last night, you got home wearing a man's clothes. Whose clothes were they?"

-Sthandiwe: "Why don't you ask Ted? The man you've hired to follow me around."

Alizwa was shocked to find out that she knew about Ted. He looked down, his mind quickly inventing what else she might be aware of and it stopped at its darkest recess - Penny's role. But as he was still reeling from the realisation that she knew about Ted, she got inside her bedroom and left him standing there. She went to sit on the bed and let out a heavy sigh. She still loved Alizwa but she knew that she could no longer be with him. There's no switch that you can just press to switch off your feelings for someone. But at that moment she wished to God there was. But nonetheless she had to let him go, and what she wanted out there was to have him just one more time before letting him go - goodbye sex. But anyway she was glad it didn't happen. She buried her face in her hands for a long moment. Then looked up and let out another heavy sigh.

-Sthandiwe: "Just walking away from Alizwa won't make this whole thing go away. I don't know how deep it is. I have to do something. I have to deal with this."

She took off the slide sandals and went to put on sneakers.

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She went to her study and took that file she got from Sihle the day before. But as she was starting to read it, she heard Alizwa calling for her. She got out to meet him in the passage.

-Alizwa: "I just wanted to let you know that I'm leaving."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure."

-Alizwa: "Once again, I'm sorry about everything. I really am."

-Sthandiwe: "Tell me, was what you did at The Orbit the other night what you had in mind when you were stealing my sheet music? Emotionally blackmailing me into forgiving you for all the shit you've done using my own lyrics, misinterpreting what 'unconditional love' really means?"

She was now completely different from the person he knew, the person he had seen just a few minutes ago. Her face was stony, voice firm, smile was a million miles away from her face.

-Alizwa: "Not really. I..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "Do you even know what unconditional love really means? Actually, no, don't answer that. Clearly you don't. But lemme school you. Unconditional love means I love you no matter what happens. No matter what LIFE throws at us. It doesn't mean I love you no matter what YOU do to

me. Or no matter how YOU hurt me. It certainly doesn't. So what you said back there was really fucked up."

-Alizwa: "Look, I know that what I..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting again) "Please just keep quiet and listen... I'm sorry about what happened to your son. Believe me I am. But you gotta understand one thing and one thing only. I wasn't the one behind that steering wheel that day. Therefore, y'all had no business coming after me. So from now on I want you and Reneé off my back, just keep your distance. Otherwise, I won't be responsible for what happens next."

And with that she turned and made her way back to the study.

-Alizwa: "Just like that?"

She didn't respond, she just got back inside the study, closed the door and resumed what she was doing. A few moments later, she heard Alizwa's car starting outside, good riddance. She continued reading the information Sihle found on Ted, and looked at the surveillance photos of him. Then she closed the file and left it there.

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She went to the home gym. The punching bag was on the floor in the corner. She took an ottoman that was there, stepped on it and hung the punching bag in its place. Everything was just closing in on her, so she wanted to let off some steam. She was angry at herself, angry at her father, angry at Alizwa, just angry about everything that was happening in her life at that point. And she always found hitting the bag very therapeutic. She'd hit it when she wanted to release some anger or bad energy. So even on that day she turned to it. She put on her gloves, then punched and kicked it like nobody's business. She stopped after about 30 minutes of continuous hitting. Then went back to her bedroom and called Sihle.

-Sihle: "Hey u."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. I'm sorry, this is not a social call. I need you to do something for me."

-Sihle: "Anything."

-Sthandiwe: "I need your eye on Ted today. All his movements. I'll call you later so you could update me."

-Sihle: "Oh, okay. No problem. May I ask why though?"

-Sthandiwe: "No you may not. Thanks, chomi. Bye."

She hung up before she could ask more questions she wasn't willing to answer. She went to take a shower, got ready for work, and left.

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During lunch, Alizwa went to meet up with Ted at News Cafe restaurant in Campus Square Shopping Centre.

-Alizwa: "I noticed when I was telling her everything last night that she seemed like she already knew some of the stuff but I didn't want to think much of it. Then this morning she let me know that she knows that you've been following her. So if she doesn't already know about you hiring Penny to seduce Chris under my orders, it's just a matter of time before she does. And I can't have that."

-Ted: "So what do you want me to do?"

-Alizwa: "What I asked you to do, Ted. Deal with Penny."

-Ted: "And I tried but she doesn't scare easily. She still wants more money."

-Alizwa: "Money she's not gonna get. If I pay up now she'll keep coming back for more."

-Ted: "Then maybe the only language she'll understand is violence."

-Alizwa: "What I know is, Thandi is already slipping away from me and if she finds out that we orchestrated what happened in Chris' office that day she'd hate me even more. She can't find out that you followed her to the airport that day and called Penny and ordered her to make a move on Chris just in time for Thandi to find him in that compromising position."

-Ted: "So you're really serious about that girl?"

-Alizwa: "How many times must I tell you that Thandi is not a girl, Ted?"

-Ted: (sarcastic) "Fine, the woman."

-Alizwa: "I love her, Ted. This is not just some infatuation that's gonna pass. I've got it bad, man. I even left the seminar in Durban early and came back just for her."

His face just lit up as he was talking about her. Clearly smitten.

-Ted: "Yeah? And what about the missus? You know she's not gonna take this well, right?"

-Alizwa: "I know it's not fair but my time with Reneé has run out. I really wanna be with Thandi. I don't care what happens as long as I have her I'm good."

Ted just gave the I-give-up sigh.

-Alizwa: "So, buddy, the last thing I need right now is Penny running her mouth to Chris. We both know what'd happen if that were to happen. Thandi will know that I was behind that incident and she'd discard me forever and run back to Chris."

-Ted: "I guess I'm gonna have to send Penny a stronger message then. The kind that she won't get a chance to reply to."

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At 16:30, Sthandiwe left her office. As she was getting out she saw Xolisa in the open lab opposite her office. He was at the sink washing some beakers.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you need to take a break. You've been at it since morning."

-Xolisa: "I'm done for the day. And speaking of taking a break. There's this new place I want us to checkout in Braam this evening. We'll take it as your belated post graduation celebration."

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh..sorry, buddy, I can't. I already have plans. Raincheck?"

-Xolisa: "I hope those plans are not with Alizwa though."

-Sthandiwe: "You don't have to worry about that. The guy's outta my life."

-Xolisa: "Good. You don't need a man like him in your life."

Sthandiwe nodded and left.

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She got home and went straight to her bedroom. She stripped off her office wear and put on blue jeans, sneakers and a heavy jacket as it was still cold and drizzling outside. Let her hair down and put on a black cap. Then she went to the closet, pushed the clothes in the hangers to the side, revealing a safe in the back wall. She put in the combination and took out her handgun, a CZ 75 SP 01. And a suppressor. She crouched down in the closet and got a gun cleaning kit. She went to sit on the bed and unloaded the gun. Then expertly disassembled it. She cleaned it then put it back together. Then stuck it in her waist and covered it with the jacket. Then left the room and went to the study. She took the surveillance photos of Ted out of that file, got an empty folder and put them inside and left. As she got out the front door, she called Sihle.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Sihle. Where's he now?...(beat)..

.Okay, thanks"

She hung up, got inside her car and drove off.

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She got to a restaurant & bar in Braamfontein. She parked outside, took out the gun and screwed in the suppressor. She took that folder then got out of the car. She stuck the gun back in the back of her jeans and covered it with the jacket and walked inside the busy restaurant.

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She looked around and spotted Ted sitting in the corner with another guy that seemed to be a client. She went to sit at the bar, discreetly checking him out with the corner of her eye. The client left Ted going through some documents on the table. Sthandiwe went up to him and sat down on the chair opposite his. Ted looked up and got startled to see her but tried to conceal it.

-Ted: "Lady, what are you doing? Can't you find another table? I'm busy here."

-Sthandiwe: "Hello, Ted. Please don't embarrass yourself by acting as if you don't know who I am. See, this is the old-fashioned way of meeting with someone when you want to know about them. Not what you specialise in, tailing people."

-Ted: "I'm gonna get you thrown out of here for harassing me, lady."

He looked around for a manager, anyone... But Sthandiwe silenced him by putting down the folder in front of him.

-Sthandiwe: "If I were you I would stop with the drama and look inside that folder."

Her voice was firm and commanding, her eyes were cold as ice, her stare piercing through him, scary. He opened the folder and looked inside. He blanched at the sight of the photos. Sthandiwe sat there and watched as the blood drained from his face. The photos were of Ted kissing some black woman.

-Ted: "Where did u get these?"

-Sthandiwe: "You should see your face right now. Imagine what your wife's would look like if she were to see those photos. Mhhh... I foresee a nasty divorce."

-Ted: "You crazy bitch! What do you want from me?"

-Sthandiwe: "I want you to tell me everything about Alizwa and Reneé. And about their entire plan about me. Don't leave anything out."

-Ted: "Listen, you can show those pictures to my wife if you want to, but I can't tell you what I don't know."

-Sthandiwe: "You sure about that?"

-Ted: "Unfortunately for you, I am."

-Sthandiwe: "I was afraid you might say that. Look under the table. I have my piece pointed at you right now. And even though the suppressor doesn't completely kill the sound of the bullet as it leaves the barrel, in here no one would hear it. This restaurant is busy, the varsity students are rowdy. So by the time they notice that my bullet has been lodged into your tummy I'd be long gone. So if I were you I'd start talking. Now!"

Ted slowly looked under the table and saw that she wasn't bluffing. His eyes widened, rattled.

-Ted: "Okay, okay. But I only know what they asked me to do. They asked me to follow you and report to them. That's all I know, I swear."

-Sthandiwe: "I could shoot you in the balls right now for thinking I'm a fool. Look, I know that Alizwa is not just your client, but he's also your friend. You've been friends for years. Friends talk about everything. So stop fucking with me and start talking."

Insert #31

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Ted: "Al didn't tell me anything about their plan. I swear."

He was wasting her time, and that made her angry. She cocked the gun under the table and he could hear the sound, causing him to bolt up from his chair.

-Sthandiwe: "No, no, Theodore, sit down and be still. You do not wanna draw attention to us."

Ted sat back down and looked down, completely freaked out now.

-Sthandiwe: "Now, I want you to open your ears and listen because I have a story to tell you... Pay attention."

But he couldn't pay attention with a gun pointed at him. He was freaked out, couldn't even look at her.

-Sthandiwe: "Look at me!"

He couldn't. Then he felt the gun between his legs, she was ready to shoot his balls.

-Sthandiwe: "Do I have your attention now?!"

-Ted: (quickly, scared) "Yes. Yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. You see, Ted, I'm a born scientist. Something I got from my mother. She was into Medical Science though and I chose another Science field, but I'm sure you already know that... I'm not so much interested in business. I don't have a single corporate bone in my body. And that's the one thing I didn't take from my father. But him and I were like two peas in a pod, so alike. And we shared a very special bond, we were pretty close, inseparable. I loved that man so dearly and he also loved me just as much. Which is why I decided to never sell his companies even though I'm not really into business. Those two businesses are the legacy he left behind. The legacy he left for me. They are my connection to him. So when someone threatens to take that legacy away and erase the memory of him, I become Jozi's number one psycho. I lose it. Do you understand?"

Ted vigorously nodded his head, scared.

-Sthandiwe: "I can't hear you, Theodore."

-Ted: "Yes, yes, I understand."

-Sthandiwe: "Good... Now that you've heard the story, I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you think I'm bluffing when I say I won't hesitate to shoot your balls off if you keep on wasting my time."

He looked at her. There was a crazy leer in her eyes. Her face was stony, scary. She was not the little girl he always thought she was. He had no doubt in his mind that she'd do it. And he knew that the only way to get out of there unscathed was to tell her what she wanted to know.

-Ted: "Okay. Okay. I'll talk."

He told her everything she wanted to know. Even about Penny. He also wrote down Penny's Cape Town address for her, writing it on one of the papers that were in front of him on the table.

-Sthandiwe: "That wasn't so hard now, was it? ...Goodbye, Teddy. I hope our paths never cross again."

She put the gun back under her jacket and got up.

-Ted: "It may have started as a mission but now Al has completely fallen for you. The guy is in love with..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "Hey, shut up! I didn't ask any of that. I've gotten what I wanted from you, now keep the extra info to yourself."

She moved closer to him. She leaned in and talked closer to his ear.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, and one more thing. If you let what just happened here slip to Alizwa and René, you know what'd happen?"

He nodded that he understood what she'd do.

-Sthandiwe: "No, no, I won't shoot your balls. I don't think I'd even get a chance to, your racist wife would beat me to it. Because if you talk she won't only find out that you're cheating on her but she'd also find out that you've been cheating with a black woman. And I'm sure you know what she'd do then."

And with that she took the folder she put on the table and walked away, leaving Ted rooted on that seat, breathing a sigh of relief - that was close. She drove home. Got there and booked a flight to Cape Town for the following morning. Then went to bed. She told herself that she wasn't going to go to work the following day (Friday). She just wanted to go to Cape Town and talk to Chris, fix things with him, before she could deal with Alizwa and René.

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Meanwhile in Houghton. Alizwa got home and found Reneé waiting for him in the main room, because she had seen him getting through the gate from the surveillance monitor.

-Reneé: "Where have you been, Al? You haven't been home or taking my calls in three days and I also heard about the stunt you pulled at The Orbit on Tuesday."

-Alizwa: "I knew you'd hear about it. And quiet frankly, I wanted you to. I'm only here to get some of my things and leave."

-Reneé: "Leave? So you're really leaving me for her? You're leaving me for that little girl, Al?"

She was now hurt and angry at the same time.

-Alizwa: "Look, I'm sorry that this is happening. But don't act as if you didn't know that this day would come. It was inevitable."

-Reneé: "The day you'd leave me for a kid?"

-Alizwa: "No. The day I'd leave you. This is not just about Thandi, Reneé. It's about us, the way you've been treating me all these years. You're no longer the woman I married. You've been treating me like I'm some boy, not your husband. You've been controlling my life, all because you have more money than I do. So yeah, this was bound to happen. It's been a long time coming."

What he was saying hit her pretty hard. She suddenly felt sick and put her hand on her stomach.

-Reneé: "What are you...say... saying, Al?"

-Alizwa: "That Thandi has got nothing to do with me leaving you. It's all you."

-Reneé: (crying) "But you had to wait until you got her before you decided to leave. Is that my fault too?"

-Alizwa: "You can say that. You're the one who sent me to her. You know that I was completely against the idea from the beginning but as your 'little boy' I had to obey, right? I told you not to go after Thandi. I told you to just sell your drowning ad agency and focus on your property business but no you had to be greedy. I mean, it's not like you are completely broke, Reneé, but your problem is greed. You want it all. And it doesn't matter what you say, we both know that the whole thing wasn't about avenging our son's death. It was about your greed... Well, you can continue being what you are without me, I'm out. I'm going upstairs to get my things then I'm outta here."

-Reneé: (tears flooding down her cheeks) "Al, please don't do this to me. Don't do this to us. You know that I need you. Don't let that girl take you away from what we've been building for years. I love you, Al. And I didn't know that you were unhappy, you never told me. But now that I know, I will change. We can find a way to make this work, baby...please."

She moved closer to him, with her wheelchair. And held his hand, beseeching.

-Reneé: "Baby, please stay. I'll change."

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry, Reneé, I can't. And don't blame Thandi for this. Like I said, this isn't just about her. But meeting her made me realise that I need to move out of this unhealthy union quickly. She made me see what I've been missing all this time. I need to live, Reneé. Live for myself, not for you."

He removed her hand from his and went upstairs to pack. Leaving Reneé weeping. Some moments later, he came downstairs with his stuff. Reneé was still sobbing.

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry, okay? But I'm not gonna stay just to please you. It's time I think of myself. You're a strong woman, I know you'll get through this. Goodbye, Reneé."

He walked to the front door.

-Reneé: (hurt giving way to anger) "Where are you going? Don't think you'll go stay in the Rosebank apartment. That apartment is mine."

-Alizwa: "Legally, it's mine. But unlike you, I'm not greedy. You'll get back everything that belongs to you."

-Reneé: "Dad was right about you. You're nothing but a stupid boy."

He was about to pull the door handle but he stopped and looked back at her.

-Alizwa: "See what I mean?"

He shook his head and walked out. Reneé continued with her sobs. Completely shattered. After a while, she dried her tears and called her mother, told her she was coming over. Then called her driver to take her there.

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She got to her mother's house in Midrand. The house was nice, a vast double storey. Clearly, her mother got a fair divorce settlement from Anthony Parker. The driver parked in the driveway and Kate, Reneé's mother, came to welcome her daughter. They hugged and went inside the house. Reneé's wheelchair was self-propelling so she didn't need help. They got to the main room and Kate helped her sit on the couch.

-Kate: "You didn't sound okay on the phone. And you look like you've been crying. What's going on?"

Reneé tried to talk but she couldn't, she just broke down in tears. Her mother reached up to her and caught her in her caring arms. She hugged her tight. Reneé buried her face in her neck like a child, like she wanted to be swallowed up. After a great deal of crying, she finally tried to pull herself together and told her mother what was going on.

-Reneé: "It's Al, mom. He's doing to me what dad did to you. He's leaving me."

-Kate: "What? He wants a divorce?"

-Reneé: "No, mom. We're already divorced. He just moved out."

-Kate: "You are already divorced? What are you talking about?"

Reneé told her the entire story. The first feeling Kate felt before feeling sorry for her daughter was anger. Angry at her for being so stupid.

-Kate: "You did what? Are you crazy, Reneé? What were you thinking sending your man to another woman, a younger woman at that? What did you think was gonna happen?"

-Reneé: "Mom, please."

-Kate: "Don't 'mom, please' me. You need to hear this. What you did was stupid. Didn't you learn anything from me? Reneé, you know how men are. They think with one organ and one organ only, and it's not the one situated above their necks. What were you thinking really?"

-Reneé: (crying again) "Mom, please. I need your support right now, I don't need you to judge me."

-Kate: "Don't be soft, Reneé. Stop crying and wipe those tears, they never help anyone. You are not gonna let some stupid little girl take your man, you are gonna have to fight. Okay? I'm not gonna let you be soft like I was. Don't let that girl do what Carrie did to me. I lost my husband to her but you're not gonna lose Al to this girl. Fight! Hear me? Fight for your man."

Reneé nodded, sniffing and wiping her tears with both hands.

-Kate: "Little girl, you're gonna have to be more convincing than that. You're gonna fight. Say it!"

-Reneé: (shaky voice) "I'm gonna fight."

-Kate: "Say it like you mean it. 'I'm gonna fight for my man'. Say it."

-Reneé: (with a firm voice now) "I'm gonna fight for my man."

-Kate: (hugging her) "That's my girl. Mistresses don't have a place in our communities. Too many marriages have been wrecked by these bitches. Do not let yours be another statistic."

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The following morning, Sthandiwe got up and went jogging as usual. Then came back, took a shower and prepared for her trip to Cape Town. She called Prof Jansen and told him she was sick and won't make it to work, then drove to the airport. Left her car there and went to board her flight when it was time. She got to Cape Town and took a meter taxi to where Ted said Penny was staying. He said she was renting a flat in someone's backyard in Mandalay in the Cape Flats and gave her the address. She wanted to talk to her first and ask her to go tell Chris everything herself. She got to the house in Mandalay as Penny's landlady was driving out in her car. She asked the cab driver to press the horn for her to stop and he did. She quickly got out of the cab and rushed to the landlady's car window.

-Sthandiwe: "Molo mama [Hello, Ma]"

-The landlady: "Molo mntanam [Hello, my child]"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know if I came to the right house but I'm looking for Penny Mdashe. Heard she lives here. I'm an old friend of hers."

-The landlady: "Yeah, she used to live here. But she left Wednesday evening. She took all her belongings and left without even saying why."

Sthandiwe's heart sank. She really wanted Chris to hear everything from Penny, not from her. And only after that, that she wanted to tell him that she was also manipulated by the same person. Then maybe just maybe after that he would be able to understand and forgive her. But now without Penny she didn't know if he would buy her story.

-Sthandiwe: "Didn't she at least say where she was going?"

-The landlady: "No, she didn't. But wait, I'll write you her uncle's address. Maybe she's there."

A little bit of hope. The landlady gave her the address and left. Sthandiwe went back to the cab and it took her to Penny's uncle's house in Khayelitsha. She got there, praying and hoping to find her there. And she did. They met and Penny confirmed everything Ted had told her and she didn't have a problem repeating it to Chris. They left together to Belville, where Chris worked.

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They got to the Medical Centre and met Chris in the corridor going out. He got shocked to see them there, especially together.

-Chris: "Thandi? What are you doing here? And what are you doing with Penny?"

-Sthandiwe: "Hi, Chris. We came to talk to you about something. Can't we go somewhere where we can sit down and talk?"

-Chris: "I was going out for lunch so yeah we can all go to the coffee shop across the road."

They got to the coffee shop and Penny told the entire story.

-Penny: "The guy approached me and said he'd pay me if I seduce you. He already knew that I had feelings for you so I was the easy person to approach. And I didn't refuse because I was gonna be paid for doing something I already wanted to do anyway. I mean, who can say no to that? Easy money."

She laughed but Sthandiwe and Chris were far from it. As she realised that she was the only one laughing she stopped and resumed her story.

-Penny: "And that day Sthandiwe saw us together, the guy called me and told me that Sthandiwe was coming. He told me what to do and when. He wanted her to find us together the way she did."

She told them everything, and the reason why she left Mandalay - Ted had threatened her, not wanting her to talk to Chris. She then apologised to the both of them for her role in the whole thing. Then Sthandiwe told Chris her story too, her story with Alizwa. She told him everything and that Ted was hired by Alizwa.

-Chris: "Penny, thanks for coming to tell me this. You're now excused."

He wanted to be left alone with Sthandiwe. Penny got the message, she got up and said her goodbyes. Sthandiwe thanked her and gave her money for the taxi, she left.

-Chris: "I'm sorry for what happened. I really am. And I'm glad you found out before those people could rip you off. But this doesn't change anything between us, Thandi. Alizwa didn't force you to sleep with him. You did that on your own. You wanted to. You chose to be with him, he didn't force you."

Insert #32

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Sthandiwe didn't say anything, she couldn't. She just stared at Chris. His words had cut deep, and the pain lingered on her face. She knew that he was telling the truth though, she's the one who messed up a good thing. After a moment, she managed to speak.

-Sthandiwe: "I guess I deserve that. I'm the one who messed up what we had and I'm gonna take full responsibility. But I wanna apologise once more, Chris. I was stupid and I hurt you. I behaved like an insecure 16 year old. Yes, I am insecure but I'm not a 16 year old, and I wasn't supposed to act like one. When you weren't taking my calls I only thought of the worst and I ended up doing the worst myself. That was stupid of me. I thought you were cheating on me and that's how I ended up in Alizwa's arms, thinking I was gonna feel better. But after spending the night with him instead of feeling better I felt bad about the whole thing, cheating is just not me. That's why I came here that day. I wanted to talk to you, confess to everything and hope to God you forgive me. I wanted to focus on you, on us, build an honest relationship with you because I love you, Chris. But then I saw you with Penny and everything changed. I was super stressed. And Alizwa was there, he was available, he showed me what I thought was love and I fell for it. But if I say I ever stopped loving you I'd be lying. I just..."

-Chris: "Oh, so you really fell for him? You were in love with him?"

-Sthandiwe: "I fell for him, not knowing that he was playing me. But my heart was..."

-Chris: (interrupting) "Be honest with yourself, Thandi. You were in love with him and you still are. You're only here because things didn't work out between the two of you. So what does that make me, huh? A consolation prize?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, Chris, it's not like that. I love you and..."

-Chris: (cutting her off) "Thandi, I'm not gonna lie and say I don't love you no more or that I no longer care. I love you and I probably always will. But I'm sorry, I can't do this. I'm not what you need, MamTshawe. What you need is therapy. You have some real issues."

With that he got up and left. She was left stumped, not knowing if she should run after him or what. She sat there and tears just rolled down her cheeks. Seeing him walk away from her like that hurt a lot. She got disturbed by the ringing of her phone. She pulled herself together and answered it. It was the mother of one of the children of the House that she volunteered in in Soweto, the House for children with cancer. She was telling her that her daughter that had leukemia had finally gave up the fight and passed away. Sthandiwe sympathised with her and told her that she'd visit the family the following day. She looked for a flight back to Jo'burg. She found one for that evening and booked it. She went to wait at the airport for all those hours that were left before her flight time. When the time finally came she boarded and got to Jo'burg just after 22:00. She went to get her car and drove home. She got home and went straight to bed, heartbroken and hating herself. She hated herself for being so stupid, stupid enough to fall for another wrong guy like Alizwa, a guy that only played with her heart. And for being stupid enough to ruin the beautiful thing she and Chris had.

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Around 23:00, Alizwa was in his hotel suite in Rosebank, laying in bed, wide awake. He couldn't sleep, thinking about Sthandiwe. He took his phone and typed her a message "I miss you, thando lwam. And I truly love you." But he couldn't hit send, his thumb just hovered above the send button. He hesitated until he changed his mind. He deleted the message, put the phone back on the nightstand and tried to sleep.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe woke up very early and followed her Saturday routine. She didn't feel like doing anything but life had to go on. She started with the laundry then cleaned the house. After that she went to take a shower, finished then got dressed in jeans, T-shirt and sneakers. She stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, staring at her own image.

-Sthandiwe: "How did I get here?"

She let out a sigh and opened the drawer of the vanity. She took out her jewellery box, fished out the chain with that pendant she got from Chris and put it on. For some reason it made her feel closer to him. Then she went downstairs to get something to eat.

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She had no appetite though, so she only had a banana. As she was still sitting at the kitchen island finishing her banana, she heard a knock at the door and she went to open thinking it was her florist. But it was KG. She got surprised to see him there that early in the morning. And he looked like hell. His eyes were puffy, with dark circles around them. Probably from crying, lack of sleep or both.

-Sthandiwe: "KG! Are you okay, buddy?"

He got inside and just broke into tears. Sthandiwe closed the door and hugged him, confused as to what was going on. She took his hand and led him to the couch. They sat down and she brushed his back, comforting him.

-Sthandiwe: "Talk to me, buddy. What's going on?"

He took a deep breath.

-KG: "I tried to call you last night but your phone was off."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, sorry about that. I was going through some stuff yesterday and I was in no mood to talk so I switched my phone off. But you can talk to me now. What's going on?"

He told her that Gugu, his girlfriend, was involved in a car accident the afternoon of the previous day. And that she was in a coma and the doctors had to perform an emergency c-section to save his daughter's life. But she was only 27 weeks, so she was a preemie in a critical condition in the incubator. He was crying not sure if his daughter was going to make it. Sthandiwe promised to have Gugu and their daughter moved to a private hospital so they could get the best care possible. And she was going to take care of the bill.

-KG: "Thank you, buddy. I don't know what I'd do if something happens to my daughter. I really don't. You know me, I'm a commitment-phobe. But the day I found out that I was gonna be a father and saw my daughter's little hands and feet in that sonogram, I changed. I fell in love with her instantly. I became so attached to that little girl. I can't lose her, Thandi. I can't."

Sthandiwe hugged him.

-Sthandiwe: "You have to stay positive. Okay? And prayer is everything."

Just then, they heard a knock at the door. Sthandiwe broke the hug, got up and went to open. It was her florist, with her white lilies. She gave them to her and left.

-KG: "And then? What's with the flowers?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm taking them to my parents' graves."

-KG: "Can I go with you?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, KG. You need to be at the hospital with your daughter and your girlfriend. I'll join you there later."

-KG: "No, I've been there all night. I need a break."

-Sthandiwe: "Then why don't you go home and rest a little? Thing is, after I leave the cemetery I'm gonna have to go to Soweto."

-KG: "For the volunteer work you were telling about?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. I'm visiting a family that has just suffered a loss of a loved one."

-KG: "It's okay I'll drop you there. I just wanna spend a little more time with you even if it's on the road."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, then. Let me go get my things and we can go. I'll take a taxi back and go join you at the hospital."

She went upstairs to get her things then they left.

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In Rosebank, Alizwa was just finishing brushing his teeth when he heard a knock at the door. He just ignored it, he was in no mood to talk. But the knock persisted until he dragged himself to open the door. He was unpleasantly surprised when he found Reneé there.

-Alizwa: "Reneé?"

-Reneé: "Hey, can I come in?"

Alizwa retreated back inside, leaving the door opened. He went to sit on the couch. Reneé rolled inside. She looked around to check if Alizwa was alone, and he was.

-Alizwa: "How did you know I was here?"

-Reneé: "Come on, baby. You know that I'm a very resourceful woman."

-Alizwa: "So what's up?"

-Reneé: "I want us to talk about our marriage, Al. You can't just walk away. We have to sit down, talk about our problems and find solutions. That's what marriage is about."

-Alizwa: "Our marriage is over, Reneé. There's nothing left to talk about."

-Reneé: "Not like this, Al. No. Not like this. We've come so far to give up now."

-Alizwa: "Reneé, please. Don't make this..."

-Reneé: "I'm not gonna give up on us, Al. I'm not that kind of woman. It'd be a cold day in hell before I let that girl take you away from me. I'm not gonna be punished for avenging my son's death. Our son, Al. Our son."

And with that she rolled out of the room, leaving Alizwa with a curious look on his face.

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KG and Sthandiwe got to the cemetery. She cleaned the graves and put the flowers.

-KG: "I still wonder you know."

-Sthandiwe: "About?"

-KG: "BB. The big guy used to like me and then out of the blue he just changed. He didn't want me anywhere near you, saying I'm a bad influence. But I hadn't changed, I was still the same person I was when he first saw me. Why did he change his mind about me?"

Sthandiwe sat down on BB's grave and motioned for KG to sit down as well. She took a deep breath then told him.

-Sthandiwe: "Remember when you invited me to Karabo's party in Thembisa when we were doing second year in varsity?"

-KG: "How could I forget that night. You just left me there without even letting me know that you were leaving."

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't just leave you."

-KG: "What happened then?... Come to think of it, it's after that night that everything changed. You disappeared for about two weeks and when you came back you were a different person. And your dad started to hate me."

-Sthandiwe: "I got abducted in that party that night, KG."

-KG: (shocked) "What? By whom?"

-Sthandiwe: "It doesn't matter. Point is, my dad blamed you for that. If I was home, that abduction wasn't gonna happen. But the truth is, he was just shifting the blame. It was not your your fault. If it didn't happen that night it was gonna happen in another day."

-KG: "Yoh! I didn't know that's what happened. What happened really? How did you get out?"

-Sthandiwe: "Those guys were sent by a man that was an enemy of my father. I never really wanted to know the full details though. The guys that man sent kept me for a week, raping me, before my dad found me. He couldn't involve the police, so he had to find and rescue me himself."

-KG: "Gosh, no wonder you came back a different person. I'm sorry, I didn't know. I'm..."

She interrupted. Not wanting to dwell much on the subject.

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, don't worry about it, buddy. It's all in the past now. No one would ever do that to me again. Now come, let's get out of here."

They got up and went back to KG's car. He went to drop her in Diepkloof and drove back to the hospital. Sthandiwe assured him that she would join him in hospital as soon as she was done there so she could make arrangements for Gugu and her daughter to be moved to a private facility.

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Later, she left that family and went to take a taxi home. As she was walking down the road she noticed a guy driving past in an Aprilia Tuono V4 1100RR motorbike. She stopped and looked at him, almost hypnotised. Her eyes were on him until he disappeared around the corner. Seeing that bike took her back to the day she first met Chris when she was visiting Palesa at her home in Melrose.

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FLASHBACK

After a great deal of talking about motorbikes. Chris had taken Sthandiwe to the garage to show her his own.

-Chris: "This is it."

-Sthandiwe: "Aprilia Tuono V4 1100RR. Wow."

-Chris: "You like it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Are you kidding me? Dude, we're talking four-cylinder engine here, and oh man the beautiful sounds it produces. Not to mention its outstanding chassis, brakes, riding position. We're talking about a streetbike with a super-bike DNA."

-Chris: "You sure love and know your bikes hey. What do you own?"

Sthandiwe: "It's nothing compared to yours when it comes to the price tag. It's a Yamaha YZF-R1."

-Chris: "Now that's a true superbike and it gets even better when pushed to its limits. It's got impeccable chassis, the engine is soulful. Not to mention the world-class electronic driver's aids."

-Sthandiwe: "Impressive. It's good to meet someone who's into biking just like me. I don't remember the last time I used mine though."

-Chris: "Why don't you come join me and my friends this Saturday for an adventure?"

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Really?"

He came closer and held her hand, smiling too.

-Chris: "I'd really love it if you could come."

He was standing so close to her and her heart was beating faster and harder against her chest. Taken by this guy.

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She finally snapped back to reality and continued walking down the road. She couldn't help but miss Chris even more. She took out her phone and called him. But his phone sent her straight to voicemail. She left a message.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Chris. It's Sthandiwe. I know that you don't want anything to do with me but I want you to know that I miss you and I'm really sorry for everything I did. I'll always love you and I..."

She didn't finish because a white quantum just pulled up right next to her, tires screeching. As she was still disturbed by that, three guys jumped out of the Quantum and grabbed her, her phone fell to the ground as she tried to fight them off, screaming for them to let her go. One of the guys crushed her phone with his boot. As she was fighting them, the chain around her neck broke and fell off next to a drain on the side of the pavement. She didn't even notice it but even if she did she couldn't pick it up, there was no time for that. She was fighting them off and she was winning until a fourth guy hopped out of the taxi and injected her in the neck with something. She immediately went numb and passed out. Then they dragged her inside the Quantum. Another guy picked up her phone from the ground. They all got inside the Quantum and sped off. There were people on the street that witnessed the abduction but none of them came to her rescue. They were also afraid for their own lives.

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Around 16:00, Chris entered his apartment carrying a bag of golf clubs, from a round of golf. He left the clubs by the door and went to sag on the couch, drained. He took out his phone and turned it on. And a message notifying him that he had 5 voice messages came through. He listened to them until he reached Sthandiwe's. He listened to it and in the end he could hear her screaming "let go of me, get off of me." and the line went dead. He freaked out and called her back. But her phone went straight to voicemail. He went crazy, hysterical.

-Chris: "No. No. What happened to Thandi?"

Insert #33

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Chris was panicking. Not knowing what to do. He wished he could be in Jo'burg right at that moment, but unless he was a magician, which he wasn't, that was impossible. There were almost 800 miles between him and Sthandiwe.

He took his phone and called his sister, Palesa. She answered with a jovial tone.

-Palesa: "Hey, big bro. Older by only a year though."

-Chris: "Lisa, listen to me. Something bad has happened to Thandi."

-Palesa: "Huh? What happened?"

-Chris: "She left me a voice message but she didn't finish talking, I could hear her screaming for someone to let go of her. And I could also hear some commotion in the background then the line went dead. I've tried calling her back but her phone's now off. I think she's been taken."

-Palesa: "Taken? By whom?"

-Chris: "I don't know, Lisa. What I do know is that you have to do something on your end. Go to the police or something. This happened about two hours ago so time is of the essence. As for me, I'm gonna take the first available flight out of here."

-Palesa: "But Chris what should I tell the...?"

Palesa was wasting time asking questions, he just hung up. He rushed to his bedroom, took his laptop and looked for available flights to Jo'burg. The only flight he could get was in the morning. And Sthandiwe was possibly running out of time wherever she was.

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Palesa was left dumbfounded, not knowing what to do. Even if she could go to the police, what was she going to tell them? She called Sihle but her phone went straight to voicemail. She didn't leave a message, she grabbed her car keys and rushed out of her apartment. She got into her car and drove at a breakneck speed to Sihle's house. She got there and desperately hit the intercom several times but no one was home to answer.

-Palesa: "Oh shit! What do I do now?"

She was panicking. She hit the gas and drove to Sthandiwe's house, just to make sure that she was really not there. She got there, got out of the car and rushed up to the gate of the front porch. And it wasn't locked as usual. She got in and went to knock on the door. She pounded on the door shouting Sthandiwe's name but she wasn't there. She rushed to the garage to check if her car was there. The garage door was locked but it's one of those aluminum doors with several mirror panels and one of those panels actually slides open. But you wouldn't see that it does unless you know it, and Palesa knew it. It is used to look inside the garage without actually opening the garage door. Palesa slid it open and peeked inside. Sthandiwe's car and motorbike were both there.

-Palesa: "Shit! Where could she possibly go without her wheels? This could only mean one thing, she's really been kidnapped."

She panicked even more. She rushed back to her car and drove like a mad woman to Brixton Police Station. She didn't know what she was going to say when she gets there but she just had to go.

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She got to the Police Station but was met up by an officer that couldn't give a damn.

-Officer: "What makes you so sure that she's been kidnapped?"

-Palesa: I am telling you, aren't I? And now her phone's off and her car is home."

-Officer: "And where's your brother? Where's this voice message? I wanna hear it myself."

-Palesa: "My brother is in Cape Town but I know what I'm..."

-Officer: "See? Lady, we can't waste resources looking for someone who was probably pulling a prank on your brother. Besides, we won't even know where to look. You're gonna have to wait at least 24 hours before you can file a missing person's report."

-Palesa: (frustrated and angry) "So you're not gonna do anything?"

-Officer: "No. Like I said, the person has to be absent for at least 24 hours before..."

Palesa just walked away while she was still talking. She was frustrated and fuming with anger. She got inside her car, pulled out her phone and tried Sihle again but her phone was still off. She rested her head on the steering wheel not knowing what to do. Siya, her boyfriend, called her asking where she was and that she should come home but she just told him to give her a break. He was just annoying her. She started the car and drove to Sihle's house again.

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Luckily that time around, when she got there she found the gate open and Muzi's car was parked in the driveway suggesting they'd just got back from wherever they were. Sihle was taking some grocery bags out of the boot of the car (trunk). Palesa pulled up behind her in the driveway and quickly got out of the car.

-Sihle: "Hey, chomi. Is everything okay? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

-Palesa: "Where have you been? I've been here looking for you and your phone's off."

-Sihle: "Family outing. Sorry hey. I turned my phone off because it was family time. Bonding with my two boys, you know."

-Palesa: "Yeah, that's nice and all but listen, something bad has happened to Thandi."

-Sihle: "Something bad?"

-Palesa: "I don't know who did it, where they did it, or even why or how they did it. What I do know is the 'what' and the 'when'. Chris thinks she's been kidnapped about (checks her wristwatch) four hours ago."

-Sihle: "What? And how does Chris know this?"

Palesa told her the story.

-Palesa: "I'm now coming from the police but they wouldn't help me without..."

She stopped, noticing that Sihle was now staring behind her, thinking about something else.

-Palesa: "What are you thinking, Sihle?"

-Sihle: "I think I know the 'who' and the 'why'."

-Palesa: "Really? But how?"

-Sihle: "What matters is that we're now left to figure out only the 'where' and the 'how'. Actually, we can get all that from the 'who' if we play our cards right. Get in the passenger side of your car, I'll drive."

Muzi was still sitting inside the car with his son, listening to what the girls were talking about. He stepped out of the car as Sihle was approaching his door.

-Sihle: "Baby, I'm sorry but I have to..."

-Muzi: "Yeah, I've overheard you guys. Go do what you gotta do, babe. I hope you find her. And please be careful."

He hugged her and pecked her lips. Then greeted Palesa. Sihle opened the back seat door where her son was sitting. She kissed his forehead and told him she was going to be back as soon as she could. She and Palesa got inside Palesa's car and drove off. Leaving Muzi getting the grocery bags and his son out of the car and into the house.

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On the way, Sihle told Palesa everything about Sthandiwe's story with Alizwa and Reneé. Palesa was open-mouthed, but even though she wasn't pleased about the fact that Sihle didn't tell her about that sooner she couldn't complain, it was no time for drama.

-Palesa: "So where are we going now?"

-Sihle: "Ted's house. Ted is Reneé and Alizwa's PI. I last saw Thandi on Thursday. She was meeting Ted in some restaurant in Braam. And if there's anyone who knows everything about Reneé and Alizwa's dirty plan, it's Ted. And since we can't just waltz into their Houghton estate, we are gonna have to use Ted."

They got to Ted's house in Melville but he wasn't there, no one was home. So they drove to his office. They got there and Sihle didn't even knock, she just opened the unlocked door and they both stepped inside. Ted was at his desk, working in his computer. When he heard the door open he looked up.

-Ted: "Who the hell are you two? And what made you think you can just waltz into my office like this?"

Sihle had no time to play, no time to answer his stupid questions.

-Sihle: "Where's she?"

-Ted: "Where's who?"

-Sihle: "Sthandiwe."

-Ted: "Who the hell's that?"

-Sihle: "Don't play games with me. I'm talking about Sthandiwe Blie, the woman you've been following around sent by Alizwa and Reneé."

-Ted: (dawning on him) "Oh, you're the one who's been following me, sent by that Sthandiwe. O-kay. And I must say, you're good hey. The info you dug on me was..."

Sihle was getting impatient. She slammed her hand on the desk, angry.

-Sihle: "Hey, I'm not here for your praises. Where's my friend? Do you know where Alizwa and Reneé are keeping her?"

-Ted: (with a smirk) "How the hell am I supposed to know that? I didn't even know that they have her until now. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got work to finish before I go home."

Sihle came closer to him, forehead to forehead, and spoke with a firm voice.

-Sihle: "Keep playing games with me and you'll end up with no wife to go home to. Because believe me I won't hesitate to send photos of you and your mistress to your wife if you keep playing these games. And then we'd see who's the smartest."

Ted looked at her and thought about what she was saying for a long beat. Then he took a post-it from his desk and wrote down the name of the hotel Alizwa was staying in and his suite number.

-Ted: "I don't know where Sthandiwe is but maybe Alizwa does. That's where you'll find him."

He handed the post-it to Sihle.

-Sihle: "Cooperating is not always a bad thing, now is it?"

She motioned to Palesa for them to go and they left. Down the corridor:

-Palesa: "Yoh! You got scary back there?"

-Sihle: "Agh, that was nothing. In my line of work, you gotta be tough to get answers. And even break some rules sometimes."

-Palesa: "Yoh. Anyway, didn't you say we're gonna use Ted to get to Reneé and Alizwa's house?"

-Sihle: "The fact that Alizwa now lives in a hotel changes everything. He's not involved in this. So he's the one who's gonna help us find Thandi."

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They got to Alizwa's hotel room and knocked. Alizwa was sitting on the couch reading some emails in his laptop. He ignored the knock hoping whoever it was would eventually go away, but they didn't. He got up and went to open, angry. He opened already talking, pissed.

-Alizwa: "Can't people read anymore? Can't you see the 'Do not disturb' sign?"

Sihle and Palesa were standing there just looking at him.

-Sihle: "Hello, Alizwa. Not good to see you."

She said that pushing past him and walking inside his suite. Palesa followed.

-Alizwa: "Who are you? And what do you want?"

Sihle didn't waste any time she went straight to the point.

-Sihle: "Your crazy wife has Sthandiwe. Where do you think she's holding her?"

-Alizwa: (genuinely shocked) "What? Reneé did what?"

-Palesa: "She's kidnapped our friend and we want to know where she's keeping her. You are her husband so you should know."

-Sihle: "She's in this shit because of you, you know. Now you have to get her out."

-Palesa: "And who's to say you are not in it too? For all we know you could also be involved in this kidnapping."

-Alizwa: "Okay, y'all need to slow down and tell me exactly what happened. Okay?"

They told him what had happened. He immediately took his phone and called Reneé, angry and disgusted by what she had presumably done. She answered almost immediately.

-Reneé: "Alizwa."

-Alizwa: "Reneé, where are you?"

-Reneé: "Exactly where you left me. Home."

-Alizwa: "Where's Thandi? What have you done to her?"

-Reneé: "Huh? What are you accusing me of now, Alizwa?"

-Alizwa: "Thandi has been kidnapped. So where's she?"

-Reneé: "She's been kidnapped and you think it's me? Really, Alizwa? Now that's ridiculous to the point of being offensive."

-Alizwa: "Reneé, I know what you're capable of."

-Reneé: "Alizwa, I am home trying to balance my drowning company's finances. I don't have time to kidnap little girls. Why would I even do that? And if you don't believe me you can come here and see for yourself."

-Alizwa: "For your own sake, I hope you're telling the truth. Or so help me God."

He hung up.

-Alizwa: (to Sihle and Palesa) "Are you sure that no else could have done this?"

-Sihle: "No one else could have done this, dude. Thandi has no enemies. It's no one else but your psychotic wife."

-Alizwa: "Okay, let's go to the house in Houghton and see. I'm gonna ride with you two."

They drove there and found Reneé busy with her work in her home office and she continued claiming she was innocent. They searched the entire house and Sthandiwe was nowhere near there.

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They went to search in all the buildings that Reneé owned, but with no luck.

-Palesa: "Okay, where to now? What do we do?"

-Alizwa: "I have no idea."

-Sihle: "We gotta make Reneé talk."

-Palesa: "But we're no longer sure that it's her that has taken Thandi."

Then she thought of something.

-Palesa: "Today is Saturday, right?"

-Sihle: "Yeah."

-Palesa: "And Sthandiwe does her charity work in Diepkloof on Saturdays. And Chris says this happened just after 14:00 so it must have happened there. Diepkloof. That's the 'where'. That's where we should start our search. She got kidnapped in broad daylight. Somebody must have seen something."

-Sihle: "Right. And I have the number of the matron of the House she volunteers in. Let's call her and ask when did Sthandiwe leave there."

They did call her but the matron told them that Sthandiwe hadn't been there that Saturday or even the Saturday of the previous week. Another dead end.

-Alizwa: "Have you guys talked to her other friend Kagiso?"

-Palesa: "KG the guy she was performing with at Rato's party. I didn't think of him, you know."

-Sihle: "But we don't have his number. I only know that he lives in Palmridge."

-Alizwa: "I have his number. I'll call him and ask if he doesn't know anything."

He did and KG told him that he had dropped Sthandiwe in some house in Diepkloof. And that he had also been waiting for her and he had been calling her but was only reaching her voicemail. Alizwa told him what happened, he went to the panic mode immediately. He asked to meet them outside

Sthandiwe's house, he was going to go with them to Diepkloof. He rushed out of the hospital. Got to his car and pushed it faster and faster until he got to Auckland Park.

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Alizwa hopped in KG's car and they rode together, Sihle and Palesa following behind. They paced the cars, moving at a brisk pace until they got to Diepkloof. They got to the house KG had dropped Sthandiwe off at earlier. It was now after 22:00, and it didn't feel right to go into someone's home at that hour. Especially a home of a family that was dealing with death. But it was a matter of life and death, there was no other way. KG went to knock. They opened for him. He asked about Sthandiwe and they told him that she left there around 14:00 and went to take a taxi home. They didn't know anything more. KG went back to the others and told them.

-Palesa: "Around 14:00? That means she got abducted around here. She didn't get to the taxi."

-KG: "It's already late now, we can't go around asking people about this at this hour. It's not safe. So let's all go sleep and come back tomorrow."

-Sihle: (angry) "What? Sleep? Are you crazy? How can we sleep not knowing where our friend is?"

-KG: "Cheese girl, you better watch your tone with me. And you better listen to me, I know this hood. It's not safe. Unless you want to lose that car and possibly your life."

Sihle drew back, but angry and unsatisfied. Palesa went to drop Sihle at home and went to her place. And KG went to drop Alizwa at his hotel and drove back to the hospital. He wanted to spend the night in those hospital chairs again, wanting to be there whenever something happens to his daughter.

And Sthandiwe? Well, there was no sign of her.

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Sthandiwe came to on the floor, handcuffed to a chain that ran through a metal eyelet bolted high up to the concrete wall. She blinked trying to remember where she was, what had happened. She got up and noticed that her ankles were also cuffed to a chain that ran through another metal eyelet bolted to the concrete floor, and she was barefooted. Shit! It all came back to her. She was abducted again and she was going to be held captive for God knows how long because now BB was not around to rescue her. And there was no way she could break those chains, she was no superhero. She looked around, taking in the room she was in. It looked like an abandoned warehouse. Where? She had no idea. It was night because the row of fluorescent tubes attached to the high ceiling were lit. There was no one in that big room. It was just her and the old building equipment. Or at least that's what she thought until she looked to her left. Her eyes went wide and she gasped, freaked out by what she was seeing. There was a metal table with leather straps, bed with leather straps, steel-mash cage, work bench with handsaws and other tools.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh shit. This is a torture room. Who the fuck wanted me here and why?"

All that came out as a whisper. She was scared to death. She looked around some more trying to see if she could not find anything she could use to free herself. But that eye search was cut short by the opening of the steel door, and two menacing guys walked in, leaving the door behind open. The first one was the one that injected her with the drug during the abduction. The other one was one of the three that were trying to grab her and she fought, kicking their butts.

-Guy 1: "Oh wow! Finally, our girl is awake."

-Guy 2: "That is some dope drug. How long has she been out for?"

-Guy 1: "It's just after 23:00 now, so she's been out for 9 hours."

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Guy 1 came closer to Sthandiwe. He looked more creepy than the other guy.

-Guy 1: "It's a good thing that you're awake. Now it's play time."

He said that with a smirk, brushing Sthandiwe's cheek.

-Sthandiwe: "Get away from me. Creep!"

-Guy 1: (still with a smirk) "Feisty, feisty. I like them just like you."

The last time Sthandiwe was in a situation like that and a fucking creep said that to her, she ended up getting raped. The thought of that happening again was enough to make her skin crawl.

-Guy 1: "You are so beautiful. Mmmh! I'm gonna have a great time with you."

That angered Sthandiwe, she spit on his face. But she wished she didn't because she just angered the guy.

-Guy 1: "Bitch!"

He said that giving her a hot, deafening slap. And then he set about the business of immobilising her further with a block-and-tackle contraption of chains and straps. He had to make sure she was completely immobilised before he could do anything because he knew she could fight, he had seen her earlier. She was now hanging from the block-and-tackle rig, leather strap around her neck, fed through a ceiling eyelet. Then the guy went to get a big sewing scissors from the work table. He cut through and removed her jeans and her underwear with no mercy. Sthandiwe just grimaced and tensed, bracing herself for what was about to happen. But there was no way she was going to show him that she was scared. That was the first thing BB taught her: Never let your enemy see that you're scared because they'll capitalise on that.

-Guy 2: "Dude, I don't think the boss would like this."

Sthandiwe thought "The boss? Who's the boss?"

-Guy 1: "If you don't want sexual satisfaction just shut the fuck up and let me do this."

-Guy 2: "I mean it, dude. The boss won't..."

-Guy 1: (shouting) "I said shut the fuck up! I am your BOSS, you're gonna listen to me."

He said that pointing a gun to him. A gun he had quickly pulled from his waist. The second guy retreated back out the open door and shut it behind him. Now Sthandiwe was left alone with that monster. Powerless.

-Sthandiwe: "So you're gonna rape me, then what? Whatcha gonna get after that, creep?"

-Guy 1: "I'm not a rapist, sweetie. I get off just by watching my victims suffer in my hands. I just love it when my victims cry and beg me to let them go. And when they realise that it's not gonna happen, when I see that fear in their eyes, hope draining from their face, I feel myself getting hard."

Sthandiwe chuckled. She was dead scared but she was playing tough.

-Sthandiwe: "You are a sick fuck, you know that?"

But by saying that she just begged for the torture to begin. The guy quickly yanked a strap that cinched the one around her neck tighter as it lifted her onto her tiptoes, then she dangled in the air. The strap was choking her but there was no way she was going to beg that sick fuck to stop. She wasn't going to give him that satisfaction. She gathered all the strength she had just to force a smile. Just pissing him off on purpose. And it worked.

-Guy 1: "What the fuck are you smiling for?"

The strap around her neck was tight, she couldn't utter a sound and it was difficult but she tried to keep the smile. And that was frustrating him.

-Guy 1: "Fuck, this is not gonna work."

He let go of the strap and Sthandiwe's feet came back down to the floor.

-Guy 1: "Brace yourself. Tomorrow is D-day."

He pressed a small remote that he took out of his pocket, and the metal door opened. He got out, leaving Sthandiwe catching a breath. Then she let out a sigh of relief. She was safe at least for that moment. But what did he mean by 'D-day'? She had no idea but she had to wait until the following day to see. There was no escaping that room because even the door was opened using a remote. She was fucked. She yanked the chains so she could sit down. She sat down and said a prayer, then just sat there waiting for what was going to happen the following day, there was no way she was going to fall asleep that night. The following day she was probably going to see who had her kidnapped.

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The following day, around 11:00, Chris touched the Jo'burg ground. Palesa went to pick him up from the airport. Then they both drove to the rendezvous point that they all had agreed on the night before, outside Sthandiwe's house. They didn't even start at home in Melrose, Chris didn't want to waste any time. On the way, Palesa filled him in on their theory, that Sthandiwe was taken by Reneé. They got there and found Alizwa, KG and Sihle already waiting for them. Chris jumped out of the car and went straight to Alizwa. He punched him in the face and pressed him against his car.

-Chris: "You son-of-a-bitch, Thandi is in this shit because of you. Because of you, damnit!"

He was beyond angry and wanted to rough him up some more. Alizwa just tucked his hands in his pockets indicating that he was not going to fight back. It was not because he was scared of Chris but he just wanted peace. And he knew that he was telling the truth. KG came and pulled Chris off of Alizwa.

-KG: "Cool down, man. Cool down."

Chris stepped back and tried to calm himself down.

-KG: "Okay, obviously there is some bad blood between some of us here. So now is the time to sort all that out and get it out of the way, amicably. Because Thandi needs us. And if we are to get her back we're gonna have to pull together."

Chris came closer to Alizwa.

-Chris: "When this is over, you and I are gonna settle up."

Then he turned to KG and shook his hand.

-Chris: "You must be KG. I'm Chris. Thanks for being here and for doing this for Thandi."

-KG: "Don't mention it, bro. I know that if it was me she would do the same."

Palesa was still in her car, she peeked out her window.

-Palesa: "Guys, let's go. Time's not on our side."

-Sihle: "I still think we should start with Reneé and make her talk."

-KG: "Are you really sure that she's behind this? I mean ST told me a story yesterday. This isn't the first time she gets abducted. She got abducted 8 years ago by her father's rival. Isn't it possible that they could do it again?"

-Alizwa: "Why would they do that? The guy's dead "

-Chris: "Oh, funny you should ask that. Didn't you come after her because of what her father did? Why did you do it knowing very well that her father's no more and she had nothing to do with what happened to your family?"

-Alizwa: (calm) "Okay, point made. But I'm sure that Reneé is behind this. I know what she's capable of. She's evil. But trying to get her to talk won't work, Sihle, trust me. So we gotta find Sthandiwe ourselves."

-KG: "Then, let's all get going."

KG got inside his car and Alizwa went to park his in Sthandiwe's driveway then got into KG's car as well, he was going to ride with him. Sihle and Chris got into Palesa's car. And just as they were about to leave, Xolisa pulled up next to them and got out of his car. He saw Sihle and went to her window.

-Xolisa: "Sihle."

-Sihle: "Hey, man. Long time."

-Xolisa: "You can say that again. So why are y'all here? Is there a party I don't know about? And where's Thandi? I'm here to see her."

Sihle told him everything. He freaked out and decided to go with them too. He went to park his car next to Alizwa's in the driveway and went to ride with KG and Alizwa. They all left for Diepkloof.

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They got there and asked around the road they thought Sthandiwe must have been abducted from. Most people said they didn't see anything. And they were about to give up when they met a young lady that showed them the video of what had happened. That's exactly what happens in the world we live in today, people would rather take a video than to come to your rescue.

But they couldn't see if it was really Sthandiwe in that video, the video was just fuzzy, cheap phone.

-Xolisa: "Sisi, could you please send that video to my phone via Bluetooth?"

They paired their phones and she sent it to him. Then she went to point them where it all happened. They looked around. Alizwa noticed something shiny by the drain, almost inside. He crouched down and picked it up. It was Sthandiwe's necklace.

-Chris: "Let me see that."

Alizwa gave it to him. He looked at it.

-Chris: "That's really Thandi in that video. This is her necklace. I had this pendant custom made for her and had her initials engraved on it in the back."

-Xolisa: "I can get someone to clean this video so we can clearly see the plate of that taxi. Then take it from there."

Xolisa called the guy he was talking about and told him that he was coming. They all drove to downtown Jo'burg.

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Xolisa directed them to an apartment building in Eloff Street. They got there and he got out with Alizwa, leaving the others behind. They got past the security point without any hassles because the security guard knew Xolisa. They climbed up a flight of stairs and finally got to the flat they were going to. Xolisa knocked on the door and waited. They could hear some dead-bolts unlocking inside. Then the door opened but remained impassable, the owner of the flat blocking it.

-Flat Owner: "Who's this now, X?"

-Xolisa: "Don't worry, he can be trusted."

The Flat Owner looked at Alizwa as if studying him, then finally decided to let them into the shadows of his apartment.

-Flat Owner: "I could offer you a seat but as you can see, this place is busy."

Yeah, he was right. The place looked like a junkyard. There was stuff everywhere, old computers and computer hardware, clutter of full ashtrays, fast food wrappers, empty soda cans, paperwork. It was just a mess. The only things of value in the apartment were his two Macbooks and several external hard drives. So Xolisa and Alizwa just stood by the door.

-Flat Owner: "So what do you need?"

Xolisa gave him the video and told him what he wanted him to do. He plugged the phone into the computer and accessed the video. He did his thing and in no time he was done.

-Flat Owner: "Here we go. You can clearly see the taxi's registration number now. But if what I see in this video is what happened, that could be a fake plate. Dead end."

-Xolisa: "So what do you suggest we do?"

-Alizwa: "Can you track someone's phone?"

-Flat Owner: "Dude, I'm the best around. Why do you think I live in a place like this, with all those dead-bolts? Not everybody likes me, because of what I do."

-Alizwa: "Right. So can you do it?"

-Flat Owner: "All you need to do is to give me the phone number and if the phone is on, I can triangulate it and give you it's exact location."

Alizwa didn't give him Sthandiwe's number because he knew that it was off, he gave him Reneé's. The guy did his thing and after some time he gave them the location.

-Flat Owner: "It's an old warehouse in Booysens."

He gave them the address and they rushed out of there, sure that was where Reneé was keeping Sthandiwe.

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Xolisa and Alizwa got to the others waiting for them on the street downstairs.

-Chris: (anxious) "So? Did you find anything we can use?"

-Alizwa: "Reneé's location. Some old warehouse in Booysens. Reneé has no business being there, so I think that's where she's holding Thandi."

-Palesa: "Great! At least now we know where she is."

-Alizwa: "We all know that Reneé didn't do this herself. She evidently got thugs for hire. And now she knows that we are looking for Thandi. So obviously the guys she hired are now guarding the place and for sure they are armed. So that means we gotta do the same. We can't just go there unarmed. So I suggest we go to my place, I have some firearms we can use."

-KG: "All registered?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah."

-KG: "I thought as much. And that means we can't use them... When we get to that warehouse bullets are gonna fly and lives are gonna get lost. And all that is gonna draw the attention of the guys in blue. So

the last thing you need is to leave behind bullets and shell casings that could eventually be traced back to you."

-Sihle: "I agree with KG. Obviously, the guys we are dealing with won't be using registered weapons. So we do not wanna be the only ones leaving traceable evidence behind."

-Alizwa: "So what do y'all suggest we do?"

-KG: "Let me go to my place. I have several unregistered firearms in my arsenal."

-Palesa: "Your place in Palmridge? Dude, do you realise that time is not on our side? By the time you come back Thandi could be dead. We don't even know what that psycho bitch is doing to her as we speak."

-KG: "Listen, we gotta plan and execute this carefully. This is not a movie, it's real life. And in real life actions have consequences. We can't risk it. I do not wanna find myself on the wrong side of the bars and I'm sure none of us here does."

-Alizwa: "Fine. We'll follow your lead."

-KG: "Chris get in my car, I'm going with you."

-Xolisa: "Okay, I'm gonna take everybody else back to my place. When you guys come back you'll find us there. And that's where we'll plan everything."

He gave KG his address and they all got inside Palesa's car and drove off to Xolisa's place. KG and Chris drove to Palmridge.

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Meanwhile at the warehouse. Reneé was with the guys from the day before, Guy 1 and Guy 2, in the hallway outside the steel door. The guys were both carrying guns.

-Reneé: "I'm telling you, they are looking for her. So you better tell your guys to secure the perimeter."

-Guy 1: "Don't worry. My guys know exactly what to do."

-Reneé: "Good. Now open this door and let me in."

Guy 1 got that little remote out of his pocket and pressed it. The lock on the steel door clicked. Then he pushed it open, allowing Reneé to roll in. And they followed, shutting the door behind. Reneé noticed Sthandiwe sitting on the floor half naked.

-Reneé: (to Guy 1, pissed) "What the hell did you do to her? She is not one of the girls that you bring here to 'tame' then take them to Hillbrow to pimp them out. She is mine. Mine. I asked you to do one thing and one thing only: take her and keep her here until I arrive, nothing more."

Guy 2 looked at Guy 1 as if to say "I told you so." Guy 1 just threw him a dirty look and turned to Reneé.

Guy 1: "You need to chill. I didn't touch her."

-Reneé: "Just give the girl her clothes back. And you need to learn some respect. You do not strip a woman naked like that."

Guy 1 holstered his gun and took Sthandiwe's jeans and motioned for her to get up. She complied. He put her now-torn-jeans (as he had cut them the night before) back on her, but at least she could be covered. Then he stepped back. Reneé rolled closer to her. Sthandiwe noticed that she had a brown A4 envelope on her lap.

-Reneé: "Sthandiwe, we officially meet. It's unfortunate that we had to meet under these circumstances though."

Sthandiwe didn't know Reneé, she only knew of her but saw her in pictures.

-Sthandiwe: "Reneé?"

-Reneé: "In the flesh."

She got up from her wheelchair and came even more closer to Sthandiwe, carrying that envelope. Sthandiwe's eyes widened.

-Sthandiwe: "You can walk?"

-Reneé: (with a smirk) "Of course, I can. But not even my husband, the one you stole, knows that."

-Sthandiwe: "So this is about him? You're doing this because of a man I don't even want? Aren't you just sick?"

-Reneé: "About Alizwa? Yeah that too. But there's more."

Sthandiwe was boiling with anger, she felt like jumping her and squeeze the life out of her but there were two guys with guns staring at her, so she couldn't risk it. Reneé opened that envelope and took out a document. She held it up for Sthandiwe to see. It was a share transfer document.

-Reneé: "I took the liberty of having this drawn up, and now all I need is your signature."

-Sthandiwe: "Share transfer?"

-Reneé: "I want you, no I need you to transfer your entire 55% shares of that major firm to me."

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "It'd be a cold day in hell before I do that, bitch."

-Reneé: "You see, I'm still nice to you, Sthandiwe. I even got you your jeans back but now you're pissing me off. You want me to show you another side of me?"

-Sthandiwe: "It doesn't matter what you do to me, I will not sign those papers."

-Reneé: "Oh yes you are signing those papers, sweetheart. It's just a matter of whether you do it before or after I torture that cheekiness out of you."

-Sthandiwe: "I'd rather die than give you those shares, sicko."

-Reneé: "Well, we're gonna have to see about that."

She turned to Guy 1.

-Reneé: "Untie her and go tie her down on that steel table."

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Guy 1 motioned for Guy 2 to come help him. Guy 2 put his gun on that work table with hand saws and other tools, then went to help. Reneé pulled out a gun from her waist and pointed it to Sthandiwe as she was being untied, no funny business. They untied her and went to tie her down, on her back, with those leather straps on that steel table. She didn't fight them, she didn't want to waste her energy on a battle she knew she wouldn't win. There was a gun pointed to her, she didn't want to catch a bullet. So she let them do what they had to do and just waited for a perfect opportunity to make her move.

-Reneé: (to Guy 2) "Bring that water and the towel."

Guy 2 went out and came back with a bucket of water, a towel and a pitcher. Reneé put the towel in the water, took it out then covered Sthandiwe's nose and mouth with it. Then she filled the pitcher with water and told Guy 1 to hold the towel tight around Sthandiwe's air passages. And she poured the water slowly over the towel. Sthandiwe tried to breathe under the towel but she was only breathing water, she felt like she was drowning.

-Reneé: "The sooner you sign those papers, the easier it will go."

After about 30 seconds of breathing water, Reneé stopped.

-Reneé: (to her guys) "Let her up."

They removed the towel and Sthandiwe coughed as the flipping table flipped upright and she got to stand. Coughing.

-Reneé: "I'll give you a little tip. Take short and shallow breaths. That way you'll recover faster, then we won't have so much downtime between sessions...It's up to you, you know. You can stop this whenever you want. All you have to do is sign those damn papers."

-Sthandiwe: (still trying to catch some breaths) "Over. My. Dead. Body."

-Reneé: "We'll begin again in 10 seconds. You better make up your mind."

She started the count down. And when she was at 5.

-Sthandiwe: "Bring it on, you crazy bitch."

-Reneé: (to her guys) "Put her down."

The guys flipped the table and she was on her back again.

-Reneé: "You still haven't changed your mind?"

-Sthandiwe: "Go to hell!"

-Reneé: (to the guys) "Put the towel back."

They did. And the torture resumed.

She struggled breathing again. It was going to be another 30 seconds of drowning. Eventually, she retreated to another place inside herself. A place she had to go to when she was abducted, tortured and raped before; the only place to go to in such situations, just to numb the pain. Her own utopia. And it works.

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KG and Chris got to Palmridge and went straight to KG's backyard flat. Luckily MaKhumalo and KG's younger brothers weren't home, so nobody asked them questions. KG went to his wardrobe. He pushed the clothes aside and slid open a fake panel at the back of the wardrobe and took out a duffel bag. Inside there were five 9mm handguns, ammunition and suppressors.

-Chris: (seeing them) "All Glocks. The venerable Glock 17."

-KG: "The piece that started the polymer gun revolution."

-Chris: "So how did you get them?"

-KG: (chuckling) "I grew up in the ghetto, bro. Orlando. With a gangster uncle. I learned to fire a gun at the age of 12. Anyway, getting these on the black market is pretty easy. And when I want to take care of a job discreetly, these come in handy."

-Chris: "Like they are now."

-KG: "Sometimes doing things by the book, following the law just doesn't quite work."

-Chris: "Talking from experience?"

KG sighed, then:

-KG: "Four years back, there was this psychotic chick that was obsessed with me. She was stalking me, terrorising my family. I ended up involving the police but they wouldn't keep her behind bars. So to protect my family, I had to take matters into my own hands. And I erased her. She was my first, and once you cross that line there's no un-crossing it. But believe me, there's no sane person that enjoys taking another human being's life but certain circumstances push us into doing it."

-Chris: "No judgement from me, bro. You had to. You chose to protect your family. Nothing wrong with that."

-KG: "And you're the first person to know about this. Not even ST knows about it. She knows the story but doesn't know how it ended. I just told her that it eventually got sorted out."

-Chris: "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

KG nodded, then:

-KG: "Ever fired a gun before?"

-Chris: "I'm a member of the Alberton Sports Shooting Club."

-KG: "But I'm sure you know that there's a difference between shooting those targets and shooting an actual human being. So, are you ready?"

-Chris: "You needn't worry about me."

KG let out a smile, nodded, took the bag and went to the door.

-KG: "We better get moving. And we need to pass by the store. I need to pump some more Red Bull and Bioplus into my bloodstream, I haven't slept in two nights."

They got to their car and drove to the store, got what they needed, then sped off to Xolisa's place in Hursthill.

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They got there and found 4 bulletproof vests. Xolisa had called in a favour from his uncle that works for the JMPD. At least they were going to be protected, well up to a certain degree. Then they tried to plan their course of action.

-Alizwa: (frustrated) "This isn't planning. There are too many variables in this equation. Too many unknowns. We don't know how many men are there. And we only know that she's somewhere in that warehouse but we don't know where exactly in there, sure it's a big warehouse. And it's not like we have its schematic. I don't like this. I don't like not being in control. We're basically going to go in there blind."

-KG: " Well, there's nothing we can really do about that. But re siwa ke nako. Re tshwanetse go tsamaya, jaanong."

-Alizwa: "What? What was that?"

-KG: "I said we are running out of time. We have to go now."

-Alizwa: "Then you should have said it like that. Use a language we can all understand. If I'm not mistaken, you're the only Motswana here. I'm Xhosa... Everybody, please tell him the tribes you belong in."

Sihle laughed. Everyone in there had heard what KG said (including Alizwa himself, but he was just making a stupid point). But for some reason, Sihle saw the need to do what Alizwa was asking.

-Sihle: "Well, I'm Zulu. Palesa and Chris are Sothos. And Xolisa over there is also Zulu."

Xolisa chuckled.

-Sihle: "What? Am I wrong, X?"

-Xolisa: "No. You're right, I'm Zulu. But I was just thinking. And please don't get me wrong, I'm not saying Thandi's kidnapping is a good thing. But something good sure came out of it. I mean, it has brought us all here together. Different personalities, different backgrounds and of course different tribes. Isn't that right?"

-KG: (bored) "Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Back to the matter at hand. Guys, we gotta get moving. You ladies, you're gonna stay behind. Alizwa, Xolisa and Chris, let's go. I'm gonna..."

He got disturbed by the ringing of his phone. He pulled it out of his pocket and checked the display.

-KG: "Sorry, I gotta take this. It's important."

He stepped outside to answer it. Few moments later, he came back in looking like he had just seen a ghost.

-KG: "Bad news, guys. That was the hospital. Something has happened but they wouldn't tell me anything over the phone, they just asked me to come in. So I'm sorry, guys, but I won't be able to come with you. I gotta rush to the hospital, something probably happened to my daughter."

Everyone, except Chris, looked at him, disappointed. Chris looked at him with sympathy.

-Chris: "Don't worry, bro. Go do what you gotta do. We'll take care of everything here. I hope your daughter is okay."

-KG: "Sure, bro. Thanks. You'll fill me in later."

He left.

-Alizwa: "So now it's just the the three of us against four guys, probably more. We just saw four in the video."

-Xolisa: "Not three. It's just the two of you. Count me out. I don't know anything about guns. If I go with you in there, I'd just be a weight on your shoulders. A liability. And that's the last thing you need. I'll just be your getaway driver."

-Sihle: "Okay. I'm coming with you, guys."

-Chris: "No, you're not."

-Sihle: "Chris, it's fine, really. I've been in situations like this more than once in my line of work. So I'll be just fine."

-Chris: "I won't discuss this with you, Sihle. You're gonna stay here with Palesa. Alizwa let's do this."

-Alizwa: "Sure."

Alizwa and Chris put on their bulletproof vests, then wore their jackets over them, not wanting to draw attention. Then they took their weapons and left with Xolisa, leaving Sihle with Palesa, frustrated. They took Palesa's car, since it was the only car they had there, and paced it to Boosens.

In the warehouse. Sthandiwe was still giving Reneé a hard time. She wasn't signing the papers and the 'drowning' torture didn't seem to be working.

-Reneé: (to her guys) "Untie her and tie her on that chair."

She was pointing to a wooden chair that was in the corner by the old building equipment. Guy 2 went to get it. Guy 1 got long-chain-handcuffs from the work table. They were the handcuffs on an extra long twist chain. Then they untied her from the table and cuffed her onto the chair.

-Reneé: "Now we are going to up the game."

-Sthandiwe: "Bring it on, bitch."

Reneé got brass knuckles from the work table and put them on. Then she released punches like rain to Sthandiwe's stomach. Sthandiwe just tensed and took them all until Reneé got tired - and she got tired quickly and took off the knuckles. Shitty punches.

-Sthandiwe: (with a smirk) "You sure punch like the fuckin' girl that you are."

-Reneé: "You still don't wanna sign?"

-Sthandiwe: "I told you, didn't I? I ain't signing a damn thing."

-Reneé: "And I'm not gonna get tired of torturing you. You know why?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because you're a psycho. A fuckin' sadist."

Reneé got angry and released several punches to Sthandiwe's face. By the time she was done, Sthandiwe was spitting blood. Nothing new though, she was used to that. So it didn't bother her, she was just not going to put her signature on those papers. There was no way she was going to just hand over her father's legacy to some bitch. Her father worked so hard to have that company.

-Reneé: (angry) "Bitch, just sign the damn papers."

-Sthandiwe: "I hate to sound like a broken record, but clearly you don't. But for the sake of your slow mind and maybe your useless ears, I'll repeat myself once more. Slowly this time: Bitch, I. Am. Not. Going to. Sign. Anything. You got that?"

-Reneé: "And since I don't have a problem sounding like a broken record, I'm gonna say this over and over again: I am not going to stop torturing your ass until you sign."

She paced around the room, clearly frustrated. Then she came back to Sthandiwe.

-Reneé: "Apparently, Alizwa told you everything. Now, let me ask you a question. Why do you think it's only now that I came after you? Why didn't I avenge my son's murder years ago? Why now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because this is not about your son. This is just about you wanting my fortune."

-Reneé: "Mmh. Not entirely true but at least you aren't stupid after all. Now, let me tell you a story. I first got into the property business 7 years ago, and that was before I even thought of going into advertising. I was just an ambitious 28-year-old then. With no capital, no help from my father and no credentials. So ask yourself, how did I get into the cut-throat Braamfontein property business?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't give a fuck how it happened."

-Reneé: "But I'll tell you anyway. Some influential businessman approached me. He was my father's golf buddy and he knew about my ambitions and the kind of relationship I had with my father. And he used all that to his advantage, without my father knowing. The guy's a respected businessman but in the shadows he's part of a human trafficking ring. So he asked me to work for him in exchange for an apartment building handed to me on a silver platter. My job was to lure in young girls into his net. I was a white, young woman with a filthy rich father so who would suspect me of such dirty activities, right?"

Sthandiwe didn't say anything. Just listening in horror.

-Reneé: "I did it and that's how I got my first apartment building. Then my business grew, I got three more buildings. Then the ad agency. That with my own money, of course. I was set, everything was going according to plan. I got married, had a family. But that guy wouldn't let me go, he didn't want me to quit. So I continued. And of course, my husband didn't know any of this, still doesn't. But this year, I finally mustered the courage to tell the guy that I quit, I just couldn't do it anymore. Wrong move, a move I had to pay for. My ad agency started losing clients and it's all his doing. Like I said, he's very influential in the business world."

-Sthandiwe: "So what does that have to do with me?"

-Reneé: "Maybe you know the guy I'm talking about. He was your father's biggest rival. And he's the one that wants your father's company, not me. He gave me an ultimatum, if I want to quit working for him then I have to get him your father's company or lose everything. And he's not bluffing, I'm already losing my ad agency as we speak. He doesn't care how I get him BB's company, he just wants it done. So I came up with a plan, and I told my husband that it was about avenging our son's death. But that was a lie. And I didn't know that I was gonna lose my husband in the process. I was just desperate, still am. I want to keep everything that I have, and that includes my husband. I don't want to give my father that satisfaction of having to crawl back to him with nothing and ask him for help. So, do you understand why I'm doing this? I'm desperate. And you know what desperation does to a person. I'm pushed into a corner here and I'm fighting my way out the only way I know how. So, sweetie, believe me I'm gonna do anything and everything to you until you sign those papers. I'm only looking out for number one here - myself."

She said that going to get a sharp knife from the tools on the work table.

Insert #36...Extra long.

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The guys got to Booyens. Xolisa drove at a breakneck speed. Alizwa and Chris were sitting together in the back seat. The atmosphere in the car was extremely tense, no one talked all the way from Hurstill until they got to Booyens. Well, up until:

-Alizwa: "Xolisa, stop here. That's our target warehouse across the street."

Xolisa stopped the car next to a functioning business building. But since it was a Sunday afternoon, the area was quiet.

-Alizwa: "We can't go park right in front of our target warehouse, unless we want to be dead before we can even get to Thandi. Sure they are waiting for us, so we gotta make sure that they don't see us coming... I'm gonna go check the coast on foot."

-Chris: "Sure."

Xolisa pulled out binoculars from the pocket of his jacket and handed them to Alizwa.

-Xolisa: "Here. You might need these."

-Alizwa: "Thanks."

He walked closer to the building they were parked next to, keeping his head down. Then he hid behind a distribution transformer, one of those metal boxes that you find on the streets next to buildings or houses. He peeked around it and used the binoculars to look across the street. He could see two men standing guard by a Land Rover that was parked at the entrance of the target warehouse. He couldn't see any more men through the windows but when he looked up the roof, he could see one man standing guard up there. Obviously, his job was to basically watch for suspicious characters and report them up.

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Alizwa returned back to the car before he could be spotted.

-Alizwa: "Okay, we have two guys in the front and one on the roof. Maybe there's more but I couldn't see them. We are gonna have to access the building from the back. Maybe there are no guards there. So, Xolisa, please drive us to that other side."

Xolisa drove, taking another street and went to park next to another warehouse at the back of their target warehouse. And fortunately, that warehouse was also abandoned.

-Chris: "This warehouse is also abandoned. So if we can get access to it, get inside, we can get a better view of our target warehouse."

-Alizwa: "But before we go, I want us to be cool, Chris. I want to know that you're gonna have my back in there. Because this is not about me and you, it's about saving Thandi. And for that to happen, it is imperative that we stick together."

-Chris: "I'll have your back...It's like you said, this is about saving Thandi."

-Alizwa: "I'm glad we're on the same page. Committed to the same outcome."

-Chris: "So, once we get Reneé what's gonna happen?"

-Alizwa: "I was married to the woman. But as painful as it would be, I'm gonna pop her head if I have to."

-Chris: "Good. Because I know I won't hesitate to put a bullet in her crazy brain."

Alizwa took out his gun and screwed on the suppressor. Then he took out a loaded magazine out of his pocket and handed it to Chris.

-Alizwa: "Oh, now that we've talked. I think you're gonna need this."

Chris took out his gun and checked the magazine, it was empty. He looked at Alizwa.

-Chris: "Son of a bitch."

-Alizwa: "Sorry. Thing is, I know that you don't like me. So I didn't wanna find myself on the wrong side of the barrel of your loaded gun. I just couldn't take the chance."

Chris just took out another loaded magazine from his pocket and loaded his gun, then screwed on the suppressor. Alizwa was still holding out that one. Chris grabbed it and put it in his pocket.

-Alizwa: "Are you ready?"

-Chris: "To save my woman? Hell, I am."

Okay, that was awkward for Alizwa but he tried to conceal how he felt.

-Alizwa: "Let's go."

They got out of the car and walked towards the abandoned warehouse.

-Alizwa: "You better keep your head down, sport."

Chris did.

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They got to the gate of the warehouse, it was padlocked. They looked around for another opening. There was none.

-Alizwa: "Okay, it looks like we are gonna have to jump over this high gate."

-Chris: "Not gonna happen."

Chris said that already reaching inside his pocket and pulled out two paper clips. He fiddled with them and then placed them in the padlock. He picked the lock and pushed the gate open. Alizwa looked on.

-Alizwa: "What, you are a lock-picker? Anyway, where and when did you get those paper clips?"

-Chris: "Clearly I'm not the only who didn't check the blindspot. I didn't see you replacing my magazine with an empty one. And you didn't see me taking the paper clips from Xolisa's desk. I took them because I knew that we might need them."

They quickly walked through the gate and ran to the entrance of the warehouse. They tried to open the door but it didn't budge.

-Alizwa: "Are you gonna pick this lock too?"

-Chris: "That won't be necessary. There are windows."

They walked around to the side. Alizwa climbed onto stacks of pallets and looked in through the window. Indeed it was empty. Chris climbed up too and they opened the rusty window together. They climbed in and jumped down to the ground. Then they ran to the other side of the building and looked to the adjacent building, their target warehouse. They couldn't see anyone on it's rear side, no guards.

-Alizwa: "Okay, since there's no entrance to our target warehouse on this side, we are gonna have to access the building through that alley then use that ladder fixed to the wall to access the roof. Take out that one guy standing guard up there, then enter the building through the roof entrance."

-Chris: "Sure there's any?"

-Alizwa: "Roof entrance? Well, if there's none that means we're screwed."

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Inside the target warehouse, Reneé was still beating Sthandiwe. But she still hadn't used that knife yet. Sthandiwe's mouth and nose were bleeding. Her face was swollen, and had cuts and bruises. Just a bad sight. But still, she wasn't signing the papers.

-Sthandiwe: "You don't give up, do you? Your plan using Alizwa didn't work, this isn't gonna work either."

-Reneé: "You better brace yourself because what's coming next is gonna be a lot painful."

-Sthandiwe: "Bitch, I can deal with physical pain. But how about you?"

-Reneé: "Listen here, little bitch. This is what's gonna happen. I'm gonna cut off your left hand fingers one by one until you do what I want you to do."

She took that sharp knife and grabbed Sthandiwe's hand, ready to cut off her pinkie finger. Sthandiwe could see the seriousness in her eyes. She could see the hate and the craziness. So she knew that she

wasn't bluffing. And she thought "Damn! I can't let her cut off my fingers. When this is over I'm gonna need my full hand to squeeze the life out of her."

-Sthandiwe: "Fine, fine! I'll sign the papers."

-Reneé: "Good girl."

She brought the papers and took a pen out of her pocket and handed them to Sthandiwe. Sthandiwe signed. She didn't like it but she just couldn't lose her fingers. So all in all she had just endured all that torture for nothing. And that was making her angry, but there was nothing much she could do. When she was done, Reneé took the papers.

-Reneé: "This could've gone better, you know. But I'm not complaining. I've gotten one of the two things I want. Now it's time I get the other one. (to Guy 1) Open the door for me, then kill the bitch so I can have my husband back."

Guy 1 pressed the remote, opening the door. Reneé walked out with that document, leaving her wheelchair behind. She walked past two other men standing guard outside the door then rushed to exit the warehouse through the front. She said her goodbyes to the two guards that were stationed there then got inside that Rover and drove off.

Sthandiwe was now left with Guy 1 and Guy 2 inside the torture room. She was going to die. No wonder Reneé told her everything, she knew that she wasn't going to get out of there alive to tell anyone about what she had told her or even do anything about it. There were only two things going through Sthandiwe's mind at that moment. The thought of dying without getting a proper chance to tell Chris how much she loved him. And not getting to be there for her best buddy, KG, to help him with his daughter. Fuck, that wasn't going to happen. She was going to get herself out of there. At least now there were only two sick-heads to take out, not three. She started planning in her head but got distracted by:

-Guy 1: "Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you. I can't kill a beautiful woman like you. I've got plans for you, sweetheart. You're gonna make money for me. But you're too feisty for my liking, so I'm gonna have to keep you here some more and tame you."

He said that brushing her hair, enraging her even more.

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Alizwa and Chris were now on the lower rear side of the roof of their target warehouse. There was no guard positioned there. They proceeded forward, weapons drawn. They reached the stairs to the upper front side of the roof, where Alizwa had spotted that one guard.

-Alizwa: "Chris, stay here. I'll go check."

He went up the old rusty stairs, his weapon still drawn. He got to the upper side and took cover behind one of the several Air-Conditioning units that were there. Then he peeked behind it. He had visual of the

entire front side of the roof. And yes, there was only one guard positioned there, and he was facing the other way. Alizwa climbed down the stairs and went back to Chris.

-Alizwa: "Confirmed. There's only one man on the roof."

They both rushed back up those stairs and went to take cover behind that A/C unit together. Chris peeked around, and the guard was still facing the other way.

-Chris: "Okay, I'll take him out. Just make sure you cover me when necessary."

Alizwa nodded and Chris left his position. He went closer to the guard, taking cover behind the several A/C units as he proceeded forward, furtively. The guard was walking around, still looking the other way, looking for suspicious characters approaching from the front of the warehouse. Chris emerged from behind and popped his head. Then he dragged his body and hid it behind another A/C unit, in a sitting position. Then he took the guy's radio and motioned for Alizwa to come, it was clear. They ran to the other side and found the roof entrance to the building. Great. They entered and walked down the stairs, weapons drawn, Alizwa in the front. When they got downstairs, they stopped short when they saw two more guards standing in the hallway. They were just standing there, smoking, looking bored. Alizwa and Chris quickly took cover behind stacks of boxes, before those guards could turn and look in their direction. There was enough distance between them and the guards.

-Chris: "Can we manage to take them out without them reacting with their loud guns, drawing attention of the other guards to us?"

-Alizwa: "That's not guaranteed...Okay, maintain cover and give me that radio. I'll draw them out. I saw this in a movie once."

Chris gave him the radio.

-Alizwa: (into the radio) "Boss, this is me from the roof. They are here. I'm seeing them scouting our building from the roof of the adjacent building. I need back up now."

-Guy 1: (through the radio) "Okay, stand by I'm sending back up now."

The two guards got the message from their boss on their radios.

-Guy 1: "Guys, listen up. Those fucks are here. Roof of the adjacent building. I want you all in the roof now, except for the guys outside my door. The fuckin' morons will come right straight to you, take them all out."

The two guards left their post and went up the stairs to the roof.

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After hearing Guy 1 talking on the radio, Sthandiwe knew that someone was coming to get her. So it was the perfect time to make her move. And she had to, because whoever was out there trying to rescue her wasn't going to be able to get past that remote steel door to get her out. So she had to get herself out.

She had to take care of those two crazy-heads that were with her. Guy 2 was standing by the door, folding his arms. Guy 1 was standing in front of her, brushing her cheek.

-Guy 1: "Sweetheart, you're now mine. Those guys out there trying to save you are gonna die. So, don't let your hopes up. There's no escaping my nest."

Okay, it was time for Sthandiwe to strike. It was a 'now or never' moment. She lunged forward with full force, pushing Guy 1 with her head. He stumbled backwards and fell, hitting his head on the corner of the steel-mesh cage, and dropped to the floor. Then Sthandiwe quickly reversed to the wall behind her, with another full force, and smashed the old wooden chair she was handcuffed to against that wall. It broke into pieces. She got the pieces off of her and was now left with the handcuffs. And since they were long chain handcuffs, she could fight just fine with them on.

The whole thing happened so fast that by the time Guy 2 reacted and went to get his gun that he had put on the work bench earlier, Sthandiwe was already on top of Guy 1, going to kick him. But Guy 1's arm was already up to block her kick, getting him a chance to quickly stand up, but not enough time to draw his gun that was holstered on his waist. They engaged hand to hand. He was stronger but Sthandiwe was extensively trained by BB. Their feet and fists were everywhere. Hers were hitting their marks and she was blocking all of his. Guy 2 had gotten his gun but he couldn't take a shot, it was too risky. There was no clear shot, he could easily hit his boss instead of Sthandiwe. So he just stood there, gun trained to the fighting two. Sthandiwe was really pressing her attack on Guy 1, taking him apart. And as a last move, she hooked his leg making sure that he hit his head on the wall as he fell. Now that was the perfect opportunity for Guy 2 to take the shot and Sthandiwe knew it. And she quickly dived down and grabbed Guy 1's now unconscious body and used him as her shield. BB trained her to be fast and to be able to think on her feet, and she was now applying just that. By the time Guy 2 realised what she had done, the bullet had already left his gun and it went straight to Guy 1's chest. Guy 2 got momentarily staggered, realising that he had just killed his boss. That moment gave Sthandiwe a chance to pull out Guy 1's gun from his waist. Then she rolled his body off of her and dived behind that steel table. Guy 2 had now regrouped and he released his second shot. Sthandiwe ducked and quickly flipped the steel table upright. The third shot hit it. Then another and another. Sthandiwe was sitting in a fetal position behind the steel table. She quickly checked the magazine of the gun, enough rounds. She put it back on, then cocked the gun. She fired a blind shot. Then:

-Sthandiwe: "Drop your weapon, man. You do not wanna do this. I know you do not wanna kill me. And I don't wanna kill you either. But I will if I have to."

-Guy 2: "I just shot my boss because of you."

-Sthandiwe: "That's a good thing because now you're gonna be free. Dude, I could see it in your eyes that you do not wanna do any of this shit. You hate doing it. But he wouldn't let you go. Am I right?"

-Guy 2: "You need to shut up."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll take that as a yes. But now he's dead, you can walk away from it all."

But he just answered that with a shot. Okay, now he was giving her no choice but to shoot back. It was either him or her. She took a deep breath and jumped out from behind the table already shooting. The weapons training she got from BB came in handy. Her second bullet didn't meander, it flew straight to

Guy 2's chest and he fell. She walked up, keeping him in her sights, gun still trained to him. She kicked his gun away and bent down to check his pulse. It was weak and it quickly faded. Then it all registered to her: "Shit! I've just killed a man." Her heart started beating faster, she got dizzy, the room felt like it was spinning. She couldn't breathe. Panick attack. She faltered. She dropped the gun, stepped back and reached out for the work bench that was behind her to steady herself.

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Then she heard gunshots just outside the steel door. It was the two guards that were stationed there, exchanging shots with Chris and Alizwa. Then the gunshots went out.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit! What does that silence mean?"

Survival instinct kicked in. She quickly grabbed the gun she had dropped and trained it to the door, ready to shoot if any of those motherfuckers walked in. Even though it was her understanding that the only person with the remote to that door was the dead Guy 1, the boss, she couldn't be sure. She was still waiting when she heard someone trying to open the door, and calling out her name. Chris. She couldn't believe it.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris? Is that you?"

-Chris: "Yes, baby. Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "I will be. I'm coming out now."

She quickly dropped the gun and went to Guy 1 and searched his pockets for the key to the cuffs. Found it and unlocked the damn things. She threw them away and took out the door remote from the guy's pocket and opened the door. She got out and saw the bodies of the two guards on the floor, then Chris and Alizwa. Her eyes engaged Chris'. She couldn't believe that he had come all the way from Cape Town to rescue her. Chris on the other side was taking in her swollen, bruised face. Her cut jeans, wet and bloodied T-shirt, and bare dirty feet. He blinked several times, fighting back tears. Seeing the woman he loved looking like that hurt him. They stood there, looking at each other. Then they just ran into each other's arms and hugged each other tightly. But Chris still had his gun in his hand. Alizwa looked at them, catching jealousy. Then they kissed. Alizwa looked away, irked.

-Alizwa: "Guys, I'm sorry to break your reunion but the reality is, there are four guys or more out there ready to shoot our asses. They're gonna be here any second from now. Sure they have seen the dead body on the roof and heard the gunshots. So we gotta go."

But Chris and Sthandiwe were just lost in each other's arms, not hearing a word he was saying.

-Alizwa: (voice raised) "Guys, now!"

They snapped out of it, and they all ran down the hallway.

-Chris: "Where's Reneé?"

-Sthandiwe: "She's gone."

He didn't ask what that meant, there was no time.

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They turned around a corner and found a wide long hallway that led to the front door. They were going to exit through that door, no more using the roof. They ran down, passing clusters of steel lockers, Alizwa behind. But getting out of there wasn't going to be that easy, the four guards were now back. The two that they sent to the roof and the two that was stationed in the front of the warehouse. They saw Sthandiwe and the guys running down the hallway and they started shooting. Since Alizwa was the one behind, he easily caught a bullet to his left thigh and he went down.

Chris turned around shooting, taking out one guard. Sthandiwe quickly got down and crawled to take cover behind a cluster of steel lockers that was near them. Alizwa dragged his leg and also took cover behind the lockers, grimacing, feeling the pain of the bullet. The guards were now also taking cover behind the first cluster of lockers. And shooting from behind them. Chris was shooting while running in reverse to also take cover with Alizwa and Sthandiwe. He got down behind the lockers.

Alizwa: "If we stay here we may not make it. So, Chris, take Thandi and make a run for that exit. I'll give them something to shoot at."

-Chris: "No. I aint leaving you, man."

-Alizwa: "Chris, please. Just keep going, make sure Thandi is safe. I'll cover you."

-Chris: "I won't let you do that. You'll never make it."

-Alizwa: "But you will. Thandi, I'm sorry."

He said that already getting on his one leg and shooting.

-Alizwa: "Chris, go now!"

Chris and Sthandiwe ran out of there. And left Alizwa exchanging bullets with the three men. But as soon as they got outside:

-Sthandiwe: "Fuck! What Alizwa is doing is suicide. Chris give me your gun."

-Chris: "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just give me the damn Glock."

She said that already yanking it from his hands ready to go back inside for Alizwa.

-Chris: "Thandi, don't do this. We gotta get outta here. That's what he also wants. You heard him."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't care. I can't let him die, Chris."

Did she just say that? Chris was asking himself. And she was already moving. Chris saw that there was no stopping her.

-Chris: "At least take the vest."

He said that already taking the bulletproof vest off and gave it to her. And she quickly put it on.

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Inside, Alizwa was still shooting and he knew what he was doing. He had already taken out two of the guards. He got back down, and reloaded his gun. He got up ready to take out the last guard but he caught a bullet to his right shoulder, and his gun fell. He stumbled and went down just as another bullet hit his vest. The last guard came closer ready to finish him off, when Sthandiwe emerged and took him out. She walked up and kicked his gun away. She looked at him, her shot was fatal.

-Alizwa: "Thandi, what the fuck?"

-Sthandiwe: "Shut up. I just saved your life."

She took off the bulletproof vest, then her T-shirt, and left with only a bra. She put the T-shirt over Alizwa's shoulder wound.

-Sthandiwe: "Put pressure on it."

Alizwa was just looking at her breasts, distracted.

-Sthandiwe: "Now you're pissing me off. At a time like this? Just put pressure on the damn wound."

She left him doing just that and went to get Chris. They both came back and helped Alizwa to the car.

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They helped him get in the back seat. Chris also got in the back seat. Sthandiwe went to sit in the front. And Xolisa drove off. Alizwa was losing a lot of blood but he still said what he wanted to say.

-Alizwa: "I can't believe that you went back for me, Thandi. You could have easily left me there."

-Sthandiwe: "Are you thanking me, Alizwa?"

As he was going to answer, he saw the look Chris was giving him and he discarded everything he was going to say and ended up saying:

-Alizwa: "Maybe."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't bother. I was only returning the favour. It doesn't mean I forgive you. (then quickly to Xolisa). Hit the gas, XO. There's somewhere I gotta be."

Insert #37

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Xolisa stepped on the accelerator.

-Xolisa: "Where to? Hospital?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't need a hospital. And in case you were too busy with the car controls to notice, the blood Alizwa is losing is from the two bullet holes in his body. We take him to the hospital, questions are gonna be asked."

Xolisa looked at the rearview mirror as Chris was keeping pressure on Alizwa's shoulder wound.

-Xolisa: "So what do we do? The guy is losing a lot of blood. And without medical attention, blood is not the only thing he'll lose. He'll lose his life."

-Sthandiwe: "Just take us to my place."

-Xolisa: "Then what? Treat him ourselves?"

-Sthandiwe: "Last I checked, none of us here was a medical doctor. Just give me your phone and I'll call a real medical doctor to take care of him."

-Chris: "Who?"

-Sthandiwe: "Uncle Vic. He was my mom's colleague and was also friends with both my parents. He's the perfect person to do this."

Xolisa gave her the phone. She called Uncle Vic and asked him for the favour. She didn't tell him much, just that her friend was shot while he was in a place he wasn't supposed to be in. Uncle Vic didn't ask too many questions either. The less he knew the better it was for him. He agreed to help them though. Told her he'd be at her place in no time. Sthandiwe hung up and gave Xolisa his phone back. Chris took off his jacket and gave it to her to cover her almost naked upper body. She took it and put it on. Xolisa was pacing the car, taking corners on two wheels. Alizwa was getting weaker.

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When they got to Sthandiwe's house it was just before 18:00 and Alizwa had already passed out. They got him out of the car and into the house. They went to put him on the bed in the spare room upstairs. Then went downstairs to wait for Uncle Vic. Sthandiwe was still wearing the torn jeans, Chris' jacket that was at least two sizes too big for her, and no shoes on. Just a bad sight. In no time, Uncle Vic was there with all his supplies. He was a white man in his early 50s. Sthandiwe took him upstairs, leaving Chris and Xolisa downstairs. He went to Alizwa and attended to him.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'll leave you to it. I need to go take a shower."

-Uncle Vic: "Yeah, do that, baby. You look like a dying street kid. And the smell is not that great either."

Sthandiwe smirked and left. Uncle Vic sedated Alizwa. And he took out the two bullets, stitched the wounds and dressed them. Then he hooked him up to an IV and gave him blood (O negative) transfusion.

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After taking the shower, Sthandiwe felt like her old self again, refreshed. Then she got dressed in jeans, T-shirt, sneakers, a leather jacket and put on a cap. She got the first aid kit and went to sit in front of a mirror. She took out the small adhesive strips and covered the two major cuts on her face and just left the minor ones uncovered. Then she went to the closet, opened the safe and took out her loaded gun and a suppressor. She slid the gun on her waist and put the suppressor in the pocket. Then she left her room and went to check up on Alizwa and Uncle Vic. She found Uncle Vic packing his stuff, ready to leave.

-Sthandiwe: "That was quick."

-Uncle Vic: "That's because I know what I'm doing."

-Sthandiwe: "Is he gonna be okay?"

-Uncle Vic: "Yeah. He's gonna be fine. But he's gonna need to take it easy. I left his tablets on the nightstand. When he wakes up, make sure he takes them. And when they run out, you know where to find me."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you so much, Uncle Vic."

-Uncle Vic: "You really are your father's daughter."

He said that already walking out the door. "What did he mean by that?" Sthandiwe was left standing there, asking herself that. She got out of the room and followed him. Found him at the bottom of the stairs.

-Sthandiwe: "What did you mean by what you just said, Uncle Vic?"

-Uncle Vic: "Don't worry about it, baby."

She was not satisfied but she let it go. He continued walking, passed by Chris and Xolisa sitting in the lounge and said his goodbyes. Sthandiwe walked him out and thanked him once more. And he left.

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Sthandiwe got back to the guys.

-Xolisa: "Is Alizwa gonna be okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, he's gonna be fine."

-Xolisa: "That's good."

Chris got up from the couch.

-Chris: "Thandi, can we talk?"

He said that pointing with his head to the kitchen.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, we'll talk. But not now. Like I said, there's somewhere I gotta be."

-Chris: "And where's that?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm going after Reneé. She left the warehouse with something of mine and I need to get it back."

-Chris: "She walked out of that warehouse alive? When you said she's gone I thought you meant that you'd erased her."

-Sthandiwe: "Unfortunately, she's still very much alive."

-Chris: "But you can't go out there now, Thandi. You are injured. You need to rest."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, time is something I don't have. Like I said, she has something of mine and I'm not letting her use it."

-Chris: "Then I'm coming with you."

-Sthandiwe: "No, you're not. Thanks to you all for saving me back there. Without you guys I wouldn't have made it out of that warehouse. I really owe you. But this fight is mine, Chris, and I'll fight it alone."

-Chris: "Thandi, this is not up for discussion. You're not going out there without support. That woman is dangerous. Look what she did to you."

-Sthandiwe: "She's dangerous, I know. And that's why I need to do this alone. Alizwa almost died out there and I do not want another person to be in danger because of me. You mean too much to me, Chris. I will not put you in danger."

Chris moved closer to her and looked deep into her eyes.

-Chris: "I thought I'd lost you forever when that psychotic woman took you. You don't know how I felt. It was horrible. And I do not want to feel that way again, Thandi. That's why I won't let you go out there alone. I want to protect you."

Xolisa saw the need to speak.

-Xolisa: "Ummh...guys, that's sweet. I've got goosebumps. But aren't we forgetting something?"

They turned and looked at him.

-Together: "What are we forgetting?"

-Xolisa: "Who, actually. KG. The guy needs our support right now."

-Sthandiwe: "KG? How do you know KG? Was he part of the rescue plan?"

-Chris: "He's the one who supplied us with the weapons. But he couldn't come with us to the warehouse because he had to go be with his daughter. The hospital called."

-Sthandiwe: (realising) "Oh my God, his daughter. I had to help him with that. How's she? Is everything alright with her?"

-Chris: "I don't know. I haven't talked to KG since he left for the hospital."

-Sthandiwe: "And when was that? When did the hospital call?"

-Chris: "About 3 hours ago."

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe something happened with his daughter. Chris, I need to go be with him. Reneé is gonna have to wait. KG comes first."

-Chris: "Now I can let you go do that. I'm sure KG needs you. And don't worry about Alizwa, we'll be here when he wakes up. Right, Xolisa?"

Xolisa looked at him and hesitantly nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you sure you wanna do that? I would never ask that of you, Chris."

-Chris: "It's okay. Really."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks... I guess."

And with that she rushed upstairs.

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She got to her bedroom, took off her sneakers and put on her biker boots. Then she went to the study. Got her motorbike keys and another set of keys that she put inside the pocket of her jacket. Then she rushed downstairs. She wanted to get to the hospital quickly and the motorbike was going to be faster. She went to the garage. Got her helmet and put it on. Then got her motorbike out. Chris and Xolisa were now standing in the front porch. She climbed onto her bike, started it and sped off. Chris was smiling all that time, watching her. Xolisa looked at him.

-Xolisa: "Dude, you're smitten."

-Chris: "I am?"

-Xolisa: "It's written all over your face... And I can see why. Thandi's a wonderful woman. She's great."

Chris wasn't sure he liked hearing another man saying that about her but he just let out a weak smile, then:

-Chris: "Let's go inside."

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Sthandiwe got to the hospital and parked her motorbike in the parking lot. She took off her helmet and left it on the bike. She briskly moved, wanting to get inside the hospital, maybe KG was still there. And as she was moving, something on the left of the parking lot caught her eye - KG's car. She walked up to it, to check if he wasn't inside. She peeked through the window and saw him reclining on the driver's seat, teary-eyed. She knocked on the window. He quickly wiped the tears then opened the door and got out.

-KG: (forcing a smile) "ST, I'm glad you're safe."

-Sthandiwe: "That makes the two of us."

He hugged her. But quickly broke the hug.

-KG: "Your face doesn't look so good though."

-Sthandiwe: "Ugh, this is nothing. What's important is that I got out of that warehouse in one piece. And I hear you also played a role in getting me out of there. So thank you, gazi. I owe my life to all of you."

-KG: "Ugh, don't mention it. Too bad I couldn't be there in person though. But that doesn't matter now. What matters is that you're here, safe and sound."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I hear you had to rush here for your daughter. How's she? I came as soon as I could."

He stepped back and leaned on his car. He covered his face with both hands and took a deep breath. After a moment he removed the hands.

-KG: "She didn't make it, ST. Her little heart just couldn't take it. It stopped."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I'm really sorry."

She hugged him tightly. After a moment, she pulled back.

-Sthandiwe: "And Gugu? How's she?"

-KG: "She's still in the ICU."

Sthandiwe exhaled.

-Sthandiwe: "How long have you been sitting here?"

-KG: "Three or four hours. I...I don't know."

-Sthandiwe: "Let's talk inside the car."

She said that opening the driver's door for him to get in. He got in and she went to get in on the other side. She put her hand on his shoulder.

-Sthandiwe: "I know it hurts, man. And I'm not gonna sit here and lie to you and say it's all gonna be okay. You have lost your baby and that's never gonna be okay. I know how much you loved that little girl and losing someone you love is very painful... They say time heals all wounds but I beg to differ. It doesn't. Some wounds never heal, you just learn to live with them. You clean them up and dress them everyday and keep moving. In time you just learn to accept them, it doesn't mean they are healed. What I'm trying to say is, I know your pain and I can feel it too. I lost both my parents, so I know how much it hurts. I'm with you in this one, gazi. And whenever you need me or need someone to talk to, I'll be there for you. Just like time, talking doesn't take away the pain, it just helps you accept it and deal with it. So yah, whenever you need to talk just call me. Okay? Anytime, day or night. I love you and I'll always have your back."

As soon as she stopped talking, KG looked at her.

-KG: "Thank you, gazi. It really means a lot to know that I'm not alone."

Seeing her always cheerful buddy that hurt, hurt Sthandiwe even more. She brushed his shoulder. He took a deep breath.

-KG: "But you know what could make me feel better right now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah? What it is it?"

-KG: "Revenge."

-Sthandiwe: "Revenge? On whom?"

-KG: "Is Reneé dead? Did y'all kill her?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. She's not dead."

-KG: "Then the one thing that'd make me feel better right now is squeezing the life out of her... You were gonna help get my daughter transferred to a private facility to get better care. And if it wasn't for Reneé that would have happened and my daughter would probably be still alive. It's Reneé's fault that she's dead. It's her fault."

Sthandiwe looked at him. She knew that was grief talking. He just wanted someone to blame for what had happened, for all the pain he was feeling. That's human nature, we always want someone to blame when we find ourselves in such situations. Sthandiwe understood that and she just played along.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. And you'll get your revenge. But right now I need you to do one thing for me."

-KG: "And what's that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Swap seats with me. I want to take the driver's seat and drive you home. You need to rest. Tomorrow you'll wake up with a clear mind."

He didn't give her a hard time. They switched and Sthandiwe drove off, leaving her bike there.

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They got to Palmridge. Sthandiwe stopped on the street, a few feet away from KG's gate.

-KG: "Why are you stopping here?"

-Sthandiwe: "We both had a bad day today."

-KG: "Yeah. Tell me about it."

-Sthandiwe: "Forget the kidnapping. I killed two men today, KG. Two men. And it makes me feel like a bad person, a devil."

-KG: "I know how it feels. It's never good. But you had to do it."

-Sthandiwe: "You ever killed someone before?"

-KG: "Yeah. But that's a story for another day."

-Sthandiwe: "You know, after the first abduction, my dad taught me how to fight and protect myself. He taught me how to kill when I have to. But being trained to do something and actually doing it are two different things. I never thought I'd ever need to use those skills. I never thought I'd actually kill someone. Threatening them was enough."

Her hands on the steering wheel were shaking and tears were now escaping her eyes.

-KG: "Hey, hey. Stop. Stop beating yourself up about that. You had to do it. And it's done now, there's no undoing it. You just need to move forward and finish what you've already started."

She nodded and wiped away her tears.

-Sthandiwe: "Please go open the gate for me."

KG got out and went to open the manual gate to his yard. Sthandiwe drove in and parked in the driveway. MaKhumalo heard the car and walked out of the front door. She found KG standing by the car, waiting for Sthandiwe to get out.

-MaKhumalo: "Kagiso, are you okay? I've been worried about you. You weren't taking any of my calls."

-KG: "Sorry, Mntungwa, I wasn't feeling like talking. But I'll be fine. Don't worry."

-MaKhumalo: "Are you sure? How's my granddaughter?"

-KG: "We'll talk tomorrow, Ma."

Sthandiwe got out of the car.

-MaKhumalo: "You're also here, Thandi, dear?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, Ma. Kunjani? [How are you?]"

-MaKhumalo: "I'm worried about this one."

She said that pointing to KG.

-Sthandiwe: "He'll be fine, Ma. Just make sure he gets some sleep. (to KG) I'm gonna need you to lend me your phone and your wheels, bro."

KG reached inside his pocket, took out his phone and handed it to her.

-KG: "Take them. I won't have a need for them tonight anyway."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. I now have to go but I'll come check on you tomorrow. Okay? And we'll organise something for Gugu."

She said that giving him a hug.

-KG: (whispering in her ear) "The gun on your waist...go use it."

Sthandiwe broke the hug and looked at him. But she didn't say anything about what he'd just said. She just said her goodbyes to him and MaKhumalo. Then got in the car and drove off.

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She called Sihle as she was driving. Sihle picked up.

-Sihle: "Hello."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, chomi. It's me."

-Sihle: "Hey, you. Chris just called, telling us that you're okay. I'm so happy."

-Sthandiwe: "It's all thanks to all of you guys. And soon I'll thank each and everyone of you properly. Tell Palesa that."

-Sihle: "Okay, I will. So where are you now? Is everything...?"

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "We'll get through everything later, chomi. Right now there's something I need you to do for me. Please."

-Sihle: "Okay. Name it."

-Sthandiwe: "You once told me about René's mother..."

-Sihle: "Yeah. Kate Smith. She got back to using her maiden name after the divorce."

Sthandiwe wasn't seeing the significance of that piece of information but she didn't want to cut her off again.

-Sthandiwe: "How's her relationship with René?"

-Sihle: "They have a healthy mother-daughter relationship as far as I can tell. But we can never know what happens behind closed doors. Why do you ask?"

Sthandiwe didn't answer that.

-Sthandiwe: "You don't happen to know where she lives, do you?"

-Sihle: "Kate? She lives in Midrand. I have her address in my files. I got it when I was looking into René. When I look into someone, I look into everything, including everyone they are close with."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good. I want that address now. Please send it to the number I'm using right now."

-Sihle: "Okay. But it's in my files at home and I'm still at Xolisa's."

-Sthandiwe: "Please go get it, Sihle. And send it to me ASAP. And oh, not a word about this to Chris or Palesa. Please."

-Sihle: "Okay. But, chomi, aren't you supposed to be resting. You just..."

-Sthandiwe: "Do you know who Kate lives with?"

-Sihle: "Alone. She lives alone. But, chomi, seriously...do not go there."

-Sthandiwe: "Just please send me the address as soon as you get it."

Then she hung up and pressed the car faster and faster.

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Just as she was entering Midrand, an SMS from Sihle came through. It was Kate's address. Sthandiwe smiled. And she knows Midrand very well so it didn't take her long to get to the address. It was now a little after 21:00. She got there, pulled her cap down and hit the intercom. She didn't know if René was not there but she just had to take a chance. Kate answered the intercom.

-Kate: "Yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Hello, ma'am. I work for René in her ad agency. I have to talk to her about work-related stuff. Is she here?"

-Kate: "No, she's not here. Have you checked her at her house?"

-Sthandiwe: "In Houghton? Yes, ma'am. But she's not there either. And there are important documents that I need her to see before she goes to the office tomorrow."

-Kate: "Okay, lemme call her and ask where she is."

-Sthandiwe: "I already did that, ma'am. But she's not picking up. So I was thinking of just leaving the documents with you, then maybe you can get them to her in the morning before she leaves for work."

Kate considered that for a long beat. Then:

-Kate: "Okay, come on in."

She opened the gate for her. She drove in. And as soon as she parked in the driveway, she got the gun from her waist, screwed on the suppressor and made sure the safety was off. She wasn't planning on

firing the gun but she just had to be on the safe side. Kate got out of the front door and came to her to get the so called documents. Sthandiwe got out of the car, gun hidden behind her.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello again, ma'am."

Kate was taking in her bruised face and was starting to really feel uncomfortable.

-Kate: "Where are the documents?"

But Sthandiwe just pulled out the gun from behind her and pointed it to Kate.

-Sthandiwe: "Get in the car. Behind the steering wheel."

-Kate: "What?"

Kate was now trembling, freaked out. Hands up in the air.

-Sthandiwe: "Now, woman!"

Kate was really scared. She quickly got behind the steering wheel. And Sthandiwe got in the back seat just behind her, gun still pointed to her.

-Sthandiwe: "Now, listen. I don't wanna hurt you but I will if you don't follow my instructions. If you do something I don't like, I won't hesitate to paint that windscreen with your brains. You hear me?"

-Kate: (trembling) "Yes. Yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now drive."

Insert #38

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Kate didn't give Sthandiwe any hassles because she was scared, afraid to die. From the sound of Sthandiwe's voice and her facial expression, she was sure that she would pull that trigger if she did anything stupid. But truth is, Sthandiwe was not planning to do any of that but she just had to make her believe that she would. She drove, Sthandiwe giving her directions, until they got to Sthandiwe's parents' house, the one in Hyde Park. The other set of keys that Sthandiwe took from the study earlier was for that house. When they got to the gate, she took them out of her pocket and pressed the

remote, opening the gate. Kate drove in and parked in the driveway of the vast, elegant, modern double-storey. With a water feature and a fish pond up front. It's in Hyde Park after all.

-Sthandiwe: "Kate, get out."

She was still pointing the gun to her. Kate got out of the car and so did Sthandiwe. They walked to the front door, Sthandiwe walking behind. She gave Kate the keys to open the door and she did.

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They both got inside the dusty but luxurious main room. Kate's eyes couldn't help but track through the room, admiring the expensive paintings on the walls. Even though she was scared, she couldn't help but say something.

-Kate: "Nice house and great pieces of art."

-Sthandiwe: "Pity I can't say the same about your daughter's heart."

-Kate: "What did she do to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just keep quiet and keep walking to the kitchen."

She walked, turned a corner and reached the kitchen area.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, Miss Smith."

-Kate: "For kidnapping me?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. For this."

She said that hitting her on the head with the gun. Kate fell on the floor, unconscious.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm really sorry."

She tucked the gun back on her waist. Then rushed to the drawer of the cupboard and took out a duct tape and a pair of scissors. And went to get a steel chair from the breakfast table. She knew better than to tie anyone to a wooden chair. She dragged the unconscious Kate up and sat her on the chair then tied her to it using the duct tape. Then she rushed upstairs and got to the main bedroom. She went to the drawer of the nightstand and took out two sets of handcuffs and their key. Rushed back downstairs and used them to cuff Kate to the chair. She wanted to make sure that she doesn't get to escape. Then she searched her pockets for her phone and anything that she could possibly use to free herself. She found none but her phone from the pocket of the cardigan she was wearing. She took it out and pocketed it. Kate was still unconscious. She gave her a hot slap and she came to.

-Kate: "Wha... What's going on? What did I do to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Shhhh! You're gonna be just fine. Your daughter just needs to return what she took from me and I'll release you, okay?... Now, do you need anything? Water?"

-Kate: "Water, water, please."

Sthandiwe went to get a glass from the cupboard. Opened the faucet, rinsed the glass then filled it with water. She went back to Kate and helped her drink up. Then put the glass down.

-Sthandiwe: "You're gonna spend the night here but hopefully by tomorrow you'll be home. However, that's entirely up to your daughter."

-Kate: "What did she take from you?"

Sthandiwe didn't answer that. She just cut another piece of duct tape and used it to cover Kate's mouth. Then she took the glass, the scissors and the tape and walked to the cupboard. She put the scissors and the tape back in the drawer. And the glass in the sink. Then took the house keys and left. She made sure that the house alarm was armed then got out and locked. Went to get in the car and drove off.

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She got back to Auckland Park before 23:00. She drove past her driveway, past her house, and parked two houses down the street. She touched her left lower ribs, and grimaced, they were painful. It was only now that she was paying attention to the pain.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit. The bitch roughed me up real good."

She took out Kate's phone from her pocket, wanting to call Reneé and let her know that she had her mother. But she decided against it. She was going to do it first thing in the morning. Right at that moment, she was exhausted and wanted to get some sleep. And she knew that Reneé knew a lot about her, so obviously she also knew about the house in Hyde Park. So if she were to tell her that she had her mother at that moment, there was no telling what she could do while Sthandiwe's sleeping. She could go look for her mother in the Hyde Park house, bypass the alarm system and get her mother out of there. She had already proven to be a resourceful bitch. So Sthandiwe put the phone back in her pocket, reversed the car and went to park in her packed driveway. The driveway is two-cars wide, leading to a double garage. Alizwa and Xolisa's cars were parked side-by-side in the front, right in front of the garage door. Then Palesa's was behind them, right by the exit, leaving a space for just one car next to it. So Sthandiwe parked next to it but didn't get out.

The events of that day, what Reneé had done to her and what she had to do to survive, came crashing down on her like a ton of bricks. Tears trickled down her face. And in no time she was sobbing loudly, hysterical. Not liking the person she had become. She sat there holding onto the steering wheel, crying, until she heard someone knocking on her window. It was Chris. She tried to compose herself and wiped the tears. Then she opened the door and got out.

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She leaned against the car.

-Chris: "Hey, what's wrong? Is everything okay with KG?"

-Sthandiwe: "He's gonna be fine."

-Chris: "Then what's wrong? Please talk to me."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm okay, Chris."

-Chris: "You are a lot of things right now, MamTshawe. But 'okay' ain't one of them. I saw the car coming in through the window but you weren't getting out. I come to check and I find you crying. So don't tell me you're okay. Just tell me what's wrong. Please, talk to me, babe."

Sthandiwe just broke down in tears.

-Sthandiwe: "It's all too much, Chris. Everything is just...it's...it's too much."

Chris pulled her in an embrace.

-Chris: "I know. I know. But it's all gonna be okay."

Then he pulled back. Lifted her chin so she could look at him. He wiped her tears with another hand.

-Chris: "Look, I know everything that's happened is a lot. You were tortured. And you, me and Alizwa, we all killed people today. That's nothing good. It's enough to make anyone break down like this. But you need to let it sink in your head that we did what we had to do to get to you then get out of that warehouse alive. Sometimes in life we are forced to make some difficult choices. And today was one of those times. Alizwa and I chose to save your life. And the three of us...we all chose to survive. We had to do what we did."

Sthandiwe was sniffing, still emotional.

-Chris: "Be strong, it's almost over. I'm gonna help you get back whatever it is that Reneé took from you. I'm gonna be with you every step of the way. I'm gonna protect you and I'm never gonna leave your side again, babe. I promise."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, please. Don't make promises you can't keep. Please, don't say things you don't mean."

-Chris: "I mean every word. I wanna be with you, Thandi. Why do you think I said what I said to you earlier in the house? Why did I kiss you back in that warehouse?"

-Sthandiwe: "That kiss was just a spur of the moment thing, Chris. And I know why you said what you said earlier, why you're saying what you're saying now. You're saying all this because we both came so close to dying today. So it's normal to feel emotional afterwards... Chris, you made it clear in Cape Town that you do not wanna be with me. And I don't blame you. I..."

-Chris: "Thandi, please, let me speak. What happened today made me realise how fast life can go. And I don't wanna live with regrets, Thandi. I wanna be happy, with you, the woman I love. What happened to you made realise that I still need you in my life, Thandi. I do not wanna live without you anymore. I can't."

-Sthandiwe: "But, Chris, you were right. I need therapy first. I'm messed up. And I don't want to..."

-Chris: "We'll get through all that together. We're gonna do it together. I'm gonna hold your hand. Okay? I'm not leaving you again. I'm not. I love you."

Sthandiwe smiled a real smile for the first time in days.

-Sthandiwe: "And I love you too."

He cupped her face and kissed her. They kissed, a long and passionate kiss. Her hands were around his neck. His moved down to her waist. But when he felt the gun, he pulled back.

-Chris: "Thandi, is that a gun?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Didn't you see it on my waist earlier?"

-Chris: "Please tell me you didn't do anything stupid. Renéé is gonna pay for what she did but going to kill her in her house is a stupid move."

She kept quiet.

-Chris: (frantic) "Thandi! What did you do? Please tell me you didn't do that."

-Sthandiwe: "Calm down. I didn't do anything. I'm coming from KG's right now, as you can see I'm driving his car. I just took the gun for safety reasons. I don't want what happened to me yesterday to happen again. I have to be safe."

Chris looked at her, searching her eyes. They got disturbed by Xolisa, clearing his throat. They looked and saw him standing in the front porch.

-Chris: "What?"

-Xolisa: "I'm sorry to disturb but Alizwa's awake."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. We're coming."

Xolisa walked back inside.

-Chris: "We better get inside."

They walked into the house.

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They found Xolisa in the lounge, watching TV. Shandiwe noticed two pizza boxes on the coffee table. The guys had ate, minus one problem for her. But eating was the last thing on her mind, she had no appetite.

-Sthandiwe: (to Chris) "Could you please let me go check on him first...alone?"

-Chris: "No problem. Go ahead."

Chris joined Xolisa in front of the TV. Sthandiwe went upstairs. She got to her room and returned the gun inside the safe. Then went out.

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She got to Alizwa's room and opened the door without even knocking. When Alizwa heard the door opening he opened his eyes. Sthandiwe walked in and stood by the door. Alizwa had only his boxers on and that made her feel uncomfortable. Uncle Vic had to remove his clothes when he was treating him.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. How are you feeling?"

-Alizwa: "I'll live. And thanks for saving me back there. And Xolisa told me everything about the doctor you organised."

-Sthandiwe: "I just want you to be okay. And like I said, I was only returning the favour. You got shot trying to save my life, so it was only human for me to do the same for you."

-Alizwa: "But still, thank you... And where's Renéé?"

-Sthandiwe: "Out there somewhere. With something that belongs to me. She made me sign the share transfer document."

Alizwa got up from the bed and removed the IV needles.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. What the hell are you doing?"

-Alizwa: "I need to get out of here and get that contract from Renéé."

-Sthandiwe: "No. What you need to do is to get your ass back in that bed."

She walked up to him and helped him lie down. He grimaced, feeling the pain of the wounds.

-Sthandiwe: "See what I mean? You've been shot two times today, Al. You need to lie down and recuperate."

-Alizwa: "Fine. But I need to talk to you."

-Sthandiwe: "About?"

-Alizwa: "You and me."

Sthandiwe just looked at him, annoyed.

-Alizwa: "You never gave me enough chance to tell you everything. You never got to hear the entire truth. I mean my side of the story."

-Sthandiwe: "It's a little too late for that truth at this point. If you are even capable of it."

-Alizwa: "You don't have to believe me but you have to hear this. When Renéé came to me with her plan, telling me that it was about avenging our son's death, I was all for it. I was still hurt, still am, and

wanted someone to pay for my son's death. But when I met you and spent time with you everything changed. I fell in love with you. And that's when..."

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, you have 10 seconds to tell me what I don't already know. What you've never told me before."

-Alizwa: "I didn't want to do it anymore. But I couldn't just tell her that because I knew that she'd just find another way to do it, she was so determined. I knew that she would find a more drastic way, and you'd be more hurt. And I didn't want that so I played along."

-Sthandiwe: "You could have come clean about the whole thing earlier than you've had."

-Alizwa: "I know. But I was still figuring out the right way to tell you... And I was right about her resorting to a more drastic measure. Look what she's done to you."

-Sthandiwe: "You were right, I don't believe you."

-Alizwa: "Thandi, if I was really in this whole thing with Reneé I was not gonna come clean to you. Was I? I came clean because I wanted you to know everything so we could figure out a way to deal with Reneé together. I did it for us. But you never gave me a..."

-Sthandiwe: "Us? There is no 'us', Alizwa. There never was. It was a lie from the beginning."

-Alizwa: "That's not true. I love you, Thandi."

Sthandiwe got up from the bed.

-Sthandiwe: "Stop it, Alizwa. Just stop it."

-Alizwa: "I'm not gonna stop telling you how I feel. I almost sacrificed my life in that warehouse just to save yours, because I love you. But now that I'm alive I'm gonna fight for you. I'm gonna fight for us, Sthandiwe."

-Sthandiwe: "Fuck you, Alizwa. What do you know about love? You and Reneé are so perfect for each other. You are both bastards full of schemes. I know about Penny."

Alizwa closed his eyes. Ashamed.

-Alizwa: "I know that was wrong. But I did it because I love you. And I know that you love me too, Sthandiwe."

-Sthandiwe: "Go to hell. And I want you out out of my house tomorrow."

She rushed out of the room.

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She got downstairs and went to join the guys on the couches.

-Chris: "How's he?"

-Sthandiwe: "He's doing okay considering."

She was avoiding eye contact with Chris and he noticed.

-Chris: "Why are you being weird?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not being weird."

-Chris: "Would you look at me for a second?"

She did but she couldn't hold the look. Thinking about what Alizwa had just said upstairs.

-Chris: "I'll go check on him."

-Xolisa: "And I gotta go back to my place."

He said that already getting up. Chris got up as well.

-Chris: "Thank you for everything, X."

-Xolisa: "Don't mention it."

They shook hands.

-Sthandiwe: "I gotta go too. To Palesa's. It's Monday tomorrow and Palesa is gonna need her car. So I'm gonna take mine to her because hers still needs some cleaning. All that blood."

-Xolisa: "And how are you gonna get back at this hour?"

Sthandiwe just shrugged.

-Xolisa: "Okay, drive your car to Rosebank, I'll be right behind you with mine. Then after you've left it at Palesa's, you'll hop into mine. And I'll come drop you here then drive home."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you. Let me go get all the keys."

She did and they walked outside. Leaving Chris going upstairs. Sthandiwe moved KG and Palesa's cars to the street, creating space for Xolisa to drive out. And she also got to open the garage and got her car out. Then returned the other cars back to their spots. Then she and Xolisa drove off.

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Chris stood in front of Alizwa's room, not sure if he should get inside. Not sure if he wanted to see him. He could see from Sthandiwe's face that something had happened between the two of them. But he ended up getting inside anyway. Alizwa was awake but under covers now.

-Alizwa: "Chris."

-Chris: "I know that I said when this is all over you and I are gonna settle up. But what you did back in that warehouse, being willing and ready to sacrifice your life like that, was enough. So consider the score settled."

-Alizwa: "Sure."

-Chris: "But this doesn't mean we are friends. And I need you to stay away from Thandi."

With that he walked out. Leaving Alizwa fuming.

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Sthandiwe called Palesa on the way and told her she was coming to leave the car. And when she got to her apartment complex, Palesa was already waiting for her. She handed her the car keys and spent a few minutes with her, thanking her and everything. Then she got into Xolisa's car and he went to drop her at home. She got inside and found Chris passed out on the couch.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris!"

His eyes snapped open.

-Sthandiwe: "Come sleep upstairs. I'm sure you're tired, it's late."

He got up and they went upstairs. She took him to the other spare room.

-Sthandiwe: "You're gonna sleep here. And everything you'll need is here."

Even though he wanted to sleep next to her, he accepted the situation and understood that it was too early to share a bed with her.

-Chris: "Okay. Goodnight. See you in the morning."

He gave her a hug and a peck on the lips.

-Sthandiwe: "Goodnight."

-Chris: "I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I love you too."

She walked out and went to her bedroom. She took off her clothes and put on her pyjamas. Then went to the en-suite bathroom and went to stand in front of a mirror. Lifted up her PJ top and looked at her bruised ribs. Then she moved for the medicine cabinet. She got an anti-inflammatory rub and rubbed her ribs. They hurt like crazy. Then she went back to the bedroom, got under covers and tried to sleep.

Insert #39

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Even without alarm, the next morning Sthandiwe woke up around the same time she usually wakes up for her morning jog. On a normal weekday she'd go for the jog but not on that day. Her ribs hurt, it even hurt to breathe. She got out of bed and went downstairs to the kitchen. She went to take out a pack of frozen peas from the freezer. Then went back upstairs and laid in bed, put the frozen peas on her bruised ribs. Then she took KG's phone, scrolled down on his contacts until she reached MaKhumalo's number and dialed. She answered.

-MaKhumalo: "Hello. That's you Thandi, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, Ma. How are you?"

-MaKhumalo: "I'm okay, my dear. But your friend isn't. You're gonna come by to see him today, right? He could really use a friend."

-Sthandiwe: "Ummmh...actually I'm calling because I want to talk to him. Where's he?"

-MaKhumalo: "He's still sleeping, baby, and I don't wanna wake him. He needs that rest."

-Sthandiwe: "He's not going to work today?"

-MaKhumalo: "No, he's not up to it. He's just gonna go see the Principal of the school and let him know about his situation, he'll understand."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. Could you please tell him to take a taxi and meet me at the hospital around 9:00. We have to have Gugu transferred to a private facility."

-MaKhumalo: "That'd be great, my dear. It's very humane of you. I'll let Kagiso know."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, thanks, Ma. Bye now."

She hung up and took Kate's phone. It had no lock pattern so she managed to access her contacts and found René's number. She dialed.

-René: "Hey, mom. Guess what? I got that bitch to sign that document."

-Sthandiwe: "It's not that easy, you know?"

René kept quiet on the other end. Clearly shocked to hear Sthandiwe's voice on her mother's phone.

-Sthandiwe: "What's wrong? Cat got your tongue?"

-René: (alarmed) "Sthandiwe? Where's my mother? What did you do to her?"

-Sthandiwe: "You have what belongs to me and I have what belongs to you. So you know what this means, right?"

-René: "You bitch, if you dare touch my mother, I'll..."

-Sthandiwe: "You'll do what?"

-Reneé: "You're not going to get anything back but I will get my mother back. And when I do, you'll be sorry you did this."

-Sthandiwe: "Listen, you better bring those papers to me or else your mother will leave this plane of existence. Catch my drift?"

Reneé pondered that for a moment. Then:

-Reneé: "I'm not going to give you anything before I get my mother back. I want an exchange."

-Sthandiwe: "Now you're talking. I'll call you later with the details."

She hung up. Put the phone back on the nightstand and closed her eyes, waiting for 20 minutes to run out before removing the pack of peas from her ribs.

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After 20 minutes, she got up and made her bed. Then went to the bathroom, dropping the pack of peas in the dust bin by the door. She took paracetamol from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and downed a couple of pills. There were stronger painkillers in Alizwa's bedroom but she didn't want anything stronger because they were going to make her drowsy and sleepy. And she didn't want that, she had a lot to do and wanted to be fully awake and mentally sharp. She then took off her PJs and got in the shower. After taking the shower, she got back to the bedroom and got dressed casually. Then went to sit in front a mirror and tried to cover the bruises on her face with make-up. But she couldn't do anything with the cuts. She covered the two major cuts with the adhesive strips again. Then went to Alizwa's room. She found him still asleep. She didn't want to wake him so she just took the paper Uncle Vic had left on the nightstand next to the medicines. It was a report he had scribbled pertaining Alizwa's injuries. After reading it, she put it back and walked out.

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She got back in her bedroom, went to the closet, opened a drawer and surveyed caps that were arranged by colour. She favoured a black Nike cap. Then tied her long, rich, black hair into a ponytail and put the cap on. She went to the bathroom, stood in front of a full-length mirror and looked at herself. Sighed. She didn't even hear Chris getting in, she just saw him in the mirror, standing behind her. Already showered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, babe."

-Chris: (smiling) "You look beautiful."

-Sthandiwe: "Liar. Not with a face like this."

-Chris: "I'm serious. Those are just few scratches, they don't take away your beauty."

He walked up to her and hugged her from behind, touching her painful ribs. She grimaced.

-Sthandiwe: "Ouch."

She said that already removing his hands from her.

-Chris: "Sorry. Where does it hurt?"

-Sthandiwe: "My left ribs. I think it's number 11 and 12. Reneé punched me with brass knuckles."

-Chris: "Oh no. Let me see."

She lifted her T-shirt, revealing the bruised ribs.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, this doesn't look good. You should go see a doctor, get an X-ray. They could be broken."

-Sthandiwe: "My ribs aren't broken, Chris. I'd know if they were broken, trust me. They are just bruised and they'll self heal. I'll just get pills over the counter for the pain."

-Chris: "Why don't you bandage them? You'll breathe a little better."

-Sthandiwe: "No, baby, that's one of the things you don't do to injured ribs. Bandaging them increases the risk of pneumonia."

-Chris: "Oops! I forgot that your mother was a doctor. So you know better."

-Sthandiwe: "Actually, I got to know this from my dad. He was doing Kyokushin and Krav Maga, and he had fractured ribs a couple of times."

She said that already returning to the bedroom.

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She went to sit on the bed. Chris came to sit next to her.

-Sthandiwe: "So, why are you up so early? You going somewhere?"

-Chris: "Yeah, I'm actually going to Melrose. My mother called, wants to see me before she goes to work. Palesa told her that I'm around."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh okay. Want me to go drop you there?"

-Chris: "No, don't worry, sthandwa sam. I'll take a taxi."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'll see you later then. I have to go see KG then go to campus."

-Chris: "You going to work? But, babe, you still need to rest."

-Sthandiwe: "Rest is a luxury I can't afford right now, Chris. I missed work on Friday, I can't do the same today. My students are writing a major test on Thursday so I have to do some revision with them."

-Chris: "But did you prepare? I didn't see you do that."

-Sthandiwe: "I seldom prepare for lectures, Chris. And this is just a revision."

-Chris: (smiling) "You're smart and that's one of the reasons why I love you."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "I wouldn't say I'm smart. I've been teaching this course for four years now. So it's all up here."

She said that tapping her head with her index finger. Chris smiled at her modesty.

-Chris: "On a more serious note. I don't like the fact that Alizwa is here. When is he leaving?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know and I understand, babe. But, Chris, the guy got shot trying to save my life. I gotta help him too."

-Chris: "He went to save you because he knows that he's the one who got you into that mess to begin with."

-Sthandiwe: "No, no, Chris. Let's not twist the facts. I ended up in that warehouse because of Reneé. Reneé and only Reneé. Alizwa had nothing to do with it, he didn't know anything about it."

-Chris: "I can't believe you're standing up for him."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not standing up for him, babe. I'm only stating the facts. Babe, Alizwa needs someone to take care of him. Yeah, he got lucky that none of those bullets hit the bones. But still he won't be able to use that leg any time soon. He'll be in a wheelchair for at least a month. It was gonna be less if it weren't for that shoulder wound. He'd use crutches, but with that wound he can't. And he doesn't even have a place to stay, he stays in a hotel. And let's face it, babe, hotel is not a conducive place for him to stay in right now. He's gonna need someone to take care of him."

-Chris: "And that someone is gonna be you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. I mean, no. I'm gonna keep him here for a day or two, just until I get hold of his sister who lives in Pretoria."

-Chris: "Can I ask you a question?"

She nodded.

-Chris: "Do you still love him?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I don't. I love YOU, Chris. What I had with Alizwa is over. It wasn't even real to begin with."

-Chris: "I'd like to say what you just said makes me feel better but it doesn't. "

-Sthandiwe: "You don't trust me?"

Chris kept quiet.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh wow. You don't."

He let out a sigh.

-Chris: "I trust you. It's him I don't trust."

-Sthandiwe: (holding his hand) "Sthandwa sam, you needn't worry. He's not gonna do anything. And if he does, I'll put him in his place. For now, I just want him to be well. And when I get hold of his sister, he'll be out of our lives for good."

-Chris: "You have a very big heart. So forgiving. And that's the other reason why I love you."

He looked deep in her eyes.

-Chris: "I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I love you more."

-Chris: (smiling) "No, no. I love you more."

Sthandiwe smiled, and went to the dresser.

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She got a pen, took Chris' hand and used the pen to draw an infinity symbol on it, then a similar symbol on top of it.

-Sthandiwe: "Infinity times infinity. That's how much I love you."

-Chris: (smiling) "That's a very long time."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. So you're not gonna be rid of me any time soon, Mister."

-Chris: "Then I'm a lucky guy."

He pulled her closer, cupped her face and kissed her, pouring his entire soul into the kiss. Then he pulled back, leaving her with her eyes still closed, breathless. She opened them after a beat.

-Sthandiwe: "I miss you."

-Chris: "And I miss you too, but right now I gotta go."

-Sthandiwe: "You're evil. You can't kiss me like that then leave."

-Chris: "The last thing we need is to hurt those ribs even more."

She tried to laugh.

-Chris: "Oh, before I go, I have something for you."

He reached inside his pocket and took out Sthandiwe's broken necklace, the one with the lion pendant. He handed it to her.

-Sthandiwe: "You found this? Oh my God, thank you, babe, for the second time. I thought I'd lost it forever. Let me go get another chain for it."

She disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later she came back with another thin chain. She put the pendant on it and asked Chris to put it on her. He did.

-Chris: "It looks good on you, Mme Motaung [Mrs Motaung]"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm never going to take it off. I promise...I love you, Mr Motaung."

He took her hand and placed it in his heart.

-Chris: "You're here."

She smiled and kissed him. Then he left.

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Sthandiwe was left going to Alizwa's room. She found him awake.

-Sthandiwe: "Morning."

-Alizwa: "Good morning."

-Sthandiwe: "How did you sleep?"

-Alizwa: "The morphine helped with the pain. So I slept as well as I could under the circumstances. I don't have much feeling in my leg though."

-Sthandiwe: "That's expected. And it's still gonna be like that and it's still gonna hurt."

-Alizwa: (sarcastic) "That's comforting."

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I just don't wanna sugarcoat anything. Anyway, I'm sure you need to take a bath. And I know you like your tub baths, but you're not gonna have one of those any time soon. We can't soak those wounds in water. And you're only gonna be able to take a shower this evening because we can't take off your pressure bandages right now. So you're gonna have to settle for a sponge bath for now. I'm gonna bring you water in a wash bowl. Are you cool with that?"

-Alizwa: "Baby, I grew up in the EC using a wash bowl. So it's nothing new."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay then, let me get you the water."

She walked out and some moments later she came back with the bowl with warm water, a fresh bath sponge, a fresh towel, soap, toothpaste and the tooth brush he used to use when he slept over.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna leave you to it. Call me when you need me."

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She went downstairs to the kitchen. Got All Bran flakes and poured them in a bowl. Then warmed some milk. She knew that Alizwa only takes his cereal with warm milk. Then she squeezed orange juice using a manual juicer then poured some in a glass. Then took out some fruit. When she thought Alizwa was probably done with his bath, she put everything in a tray and took it upstairs. She knocked and he told her to come in. He was done and sitting on the bed. She walked in and put the tray on the nightstand.

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I couldn't make you proper breakfast. I'm running late for work."

-Alizwa: "It's okay. Thanks. Speaking of, I need to get a sick leave from work. Think you...?"

-Sthandiwe: "Call them. And my doctor will give you a medical certificate."

-Alizwa: "Thanks. I read the doctor's report. I got lucky."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah... And I haven't thanked you yet. Thanks for what you did for me. I really appreciate it."

-Alizwa: "I have a fucked up leg and arm but I don't regret doing what I did. I'd do it all over again if it means saving your life. I love you, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "Let's get one thing straight. If you still wanna be under my roof, you're gonna have to stop with that. I'm with Chris, Al, and you gotta accept that. What we had is over."

-Alizwa: "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't love me anymore."

She did.

-Alizwa: "I don't believe you."

-Sthandiwe: "That's your problem... Just eat your breakfast so you can take your meds. Make sure you take them, especially the antibiotics. You do not want those wounds to be infected."

-Alizwa: (smiling) "Yes, doctor."

-Sthandiwe: "You're not funny... Anyway, you're gonna have to call your sister and tell her what happened. You're gonna have to go stay with her until you recover."

-Alizwa: "Oh, you don't want me here anymore? That's alright, I'll call her."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now I'm gonna need you to give me your hotel room keycard so I could go get you some clothes. You're gonna stay here until your sister comes and get you. In the meantime, I was gonna give you my dad's clothes because I'm gonna have to burn yours. They are heavily stained with blood. But I know how much you hate him, so..."

-Alizwa: (laughing) "Come on, just go get me the old man's clothes. I know I'm sexy and all but hey I gotta cover this body."

-Sthandiwe: "You're so full of yourself."

He just smiled. She left with the wash bowl and everything he used to clean himself. Then came back with a Guess T-shirt and Levi's denim shorts.

-Alizwa: "Your old man had style, huh."

-Sthandiwe: "Just shut up and put the clothes on."

-Alizwa: "You're gonna have to help me with that. I have only one arm, remember?"

She was feeling uncomfortable but she helped him anyway. As soon as she was done, she tried to walk away, wanting to get out of there as soon as she could. But Alizwa grabbed her arm with his left hand and pulled her to him. She always liked his physical strength, it was such a turn on when they were still together. Their eyes engaged. And before she knew it, his lips were on hers. She wanted to push him away but she couldn't. She let him kiss her, but she didn't respond. Then he pulled back and looked at her.

-Alizwa: "It's not over yet. We're not over."

She wasn't sure what she was feeling. But what she knew was that she could not be with him.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't ever do that again."

-Alizwa: "If you didn't want it, you could have simply pushed me but you didn't."

-Sthandiwe: "Just give me the keycard. I gotta go to work. Are you gonna be okay on your own?"

-Alizwa: "Do I have a choice? The card is in my wallet in my car. My car keys are in the pocket of my jeans."

His bloodied clothes were still where Uncle Vic had put them, on a couch in the corner below the bed. She went to them and took out the car keys from his jeans pocket. Alizwa looked at her as she walked out. He smiled, sure that he still had a chance with her.

Insert #40

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Sthandiwe got to her bedroom, grabbed her motorbike keys and the handcuffs key on the nightstand then went to get her gun out of the safe. She put all of that inside her handbag. Then went to the study, got her laptop, put it inside its bag and walked out. She got downstairs and grabbed KG's and Palesa's

car keys from an end-table in the lounge and walked out. She got to KG's car in the driveway and put all her things inside then went to Alizwa's car. She got inside and found the wallet in the glove box. Inside the wallet, she didn't only find the keycard she was looking for but she also found two tickets to Johannesburg's Toni Braxton and Babyface concert. The 3rd of September had already passed and the tickets were never used. That made her wonder. But she put them back inside, took out the keycard she wanted and returned the wallet in the glove box. Then she got out of the car. She opened Palesa's car and got all her belongings out, including the bulletproof vests and the guns the guys used, and put them all in the boot of Alizwa's car. Then she drove Palesa's car to a nearby carwash, her usual, for the blood on the back seat to be cleaned. But when she got there, the guy that usually cleaned her car wasn't in. And he's the only one she trusted. They told her that he'd be in only in the afternoon. But that wasn't a problem for her, she wasn't planning on waiting for the car anyway. She left it there and told them that she'd come pick it up later. Then walked back home. She got there, got inside KG's car and drove off to the hospital.

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Meanwhile in Hursthill at Xolisa's place. Xolisa was sitting on the bed, wearing a nice suit and a tie, an unusual dress code for him. He was busy on his laptop. The display was opened on the website of a Mechanical Engineering company in Booyens. The same company that they parked next to its building when they were in Booyens the day before, across the street from the warehouse Sthandiwe was kept in. He was checking out the company executives. Then he folded the laptop display down and went to stand in front of a mirror and fixed his tie.

-Xolisa: "I really hope this works. Now I just need to make that phone call."

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Sthandiwe got to the hospital just after 09:00 and her motorbike was still there, the parking lot had a 24 hour security. She went to wait for KG by the entrance of the hospital. But she wasn't sure if he was still coming or if he was already there, and she couldn't call him because she had his phone. She waited and waited until 10:00. Then she decided to go inside and wait for him there. And when she got in, she found him sitting in the waiting area, his face buried in his hands.

-Sthandiwe: "KG?"

He removed the hands and looked up at her. He didn't look so good.

-KG: "Hey."

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't know that you were already inside. I was waiting for you outside by the entrance."

-KG: "Oh. I got here before 09:00."

-Sthandiwe: "You don't look so good."

-KG: "I don't feel so good either. Gugu's gone."

-Sthandiwe: "Gone? Gone where?"

-KG: "To the land of the dead."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "What?"

-KG: "Yeah."

She sat down next to him.

-Sthandiwe: "What happened?"

-KG: "When I got here it had just happened. They say she woke up from the coma this morning but then she had uncontrollable seizures and her heart stopped... They couldn't revive her."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh no. I'm so sorry, KG. I don't know what to say. I'm really sorry."

-KG: "You don't have to say anything. It is what it is. I just wanna get outta here. I was just waiting for you."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh okay. Ummh..."

Let's go then."

They got up, exited the hospital and got to the parking lot.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you gonna be able to drive yourself home?"

-KG: "Yeah, it's cool."

-Sthandiwe: "I wish I could go with you but I gotta go to work. See you later?"

-KG: "Don't worry about it. Later it is."

He was too calm for Sthandiwe's liking.

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh...there's somewhere I gotta be after work. And I'm still gonna need your four wheels. Do you mind using my two wheels?"

-KG: "No problem."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks."

She took her motorbike keys out of her handbag and handed them to him. But she didn't give him his phone back and he didn't ask for it either. He just jumped on the motorbike, started it, put on the helmet and drove off. Leaving Sthandiwe watching him, wondering why he was so calm about the whole Gugu thing. Or maybe he was still in a state of shock. When he got out of sight, she hopped into his car and drove to work. When she got there, everyone was asking about what had happened to her face and she just told them that she got mugged over the weekend. She went to conduct her lecture at 11:40. And another was at 12:35.

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Around 12:30, Xolisa got to Booyens. He parked his car a few metres away from the Engineering company and waited. The warehouse across the street was now cordoned off with a police tape. But Xolisa ignored that and focused on what he was there for. He kept exchanging glances between the Engineering company's parking lot and his iPad that was on the seat next to him showing a picture of a man from the website of the company. The man was the company's Managing Director, Mr Turner.

-Xolisa: "Come on, come out, man."

Finally, he saw the man walking to his car in the parking lot. He got inside the car and drove out. It was now 13:00, so he was obviously going out for lunch. As soon as his car disappeared around the corner, Xolisa got out of his car with a briefcase, looking all serious, and walked to the company. He walked inside to a young female receptionist in the small reception. He greeted her with a smile.

-Xolisa: "Hello, Miss."

Clearly Xolisa's smile was contagious because she also smiled.

-Receptionist: "Hello, sir. How may I help you?"

-Xolisa: "I'm meeting Mr Turner. Is he in?"

-Receptionist: "No, sorry. He just went out for lunch. Do you have an appointment?"

-Xolisa: "Yes. I'm Sthembiso Zulu. I called this morning."

-Receptionist: "Oh, Mr Zulu from one the major supermarkets in the country. I remember your call."

-Xolisa: "Yes. Our branches downtown are making some changes and we could use your services. We need new vegetable and fruit handling equipment. And let's face it, this company's reputation speaks for itself."

-Receptionist: "They've been in the industry for decades."

-Xolisa: "Exactly. And I know that I got lucky to get an appointment with Mr Turner today. And I know that he only agreed to meet me after lunch but I was already in the neighborhood, had another meeting not far from here, so I thought I should just pop in. Was hoping to catch him before he goes out for lunch."

-Receptionist: "I really can't tell a potential client to come back later. So you can wait for him over there."

She said that pointing to a couch in the corner.

-Receptionist: "But that's if you don't mind waiting, of course."

-Xolisa: "No, I don't mind at all. Thank you. But can I use the restroom first?"

-Receptionist: "Oh, yes, yes. Down the hallway, then turn right. You'll see it on your left."

-Xolisa: "Thank you."

He walked down the hallway with his briefcase, his eyes darting around, obviously looking for something. He didn't even know where he'd find it but he just had to take the chance. He turned right as instructed but he was definitely not looking for a restroom. He walked past it and continued to the end of the passage and smiled when he found what he was looking for. The closed door of the room he was looking at was written 'Control Room'. He tried the door knob, the door wasn't locked.

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He opened it and walked inside. Only to be met by a Security Guard that just got up from a nap.

-Security Guard: "Sir. This is a restricted ar..."

Bam! Xolisa released one hard punch across the guard's face, cutting his statement. And he didn't give him a chance to react, he coupled the punch with a kick. The guard stumbled backwards hitting his head on the desk as he fell to the floor, unconscious. Then he quickly got the guard's taser from his waist and used it to immobilise the guy even further. Then he looked around the room and saw what he was really looking for, the surveillance monitor. He observed the entire building's surveillance, including the one from an exterior surveillance camera that was on the side of the building, trained on the street. It covered the street and the warehouse across the street - the warehouse they were in the day before. Between him, Alizwa and Chris, he was the only one who spotted the camera the day before. But he didn't want to worry them about it, especially Sthandiwe who still had a lot to deal with. He just decided to take care of it himself. Obviously, the camera had captured him pulling up in front of the warehouse with Palesa's car and Sthandiwe and Chris carrying the bleeding Alizwa out of the warehouse and into the car. People had died in that warehouse and the police were going to look into their deaths so he couldn't take the chance of having that footage out there for the police to see. He ran his hand on a wire connected to the USB port on the side of the surveillance computer which led him to a steel cabinet in the room's corner. The cabinet wasn't locked, he opened it and gazed at a recorder inside it. He ejected the recordable tape out of the recorder and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. Then looked at the surveillance monitor again, the building surveillance was lost. But he still looked around the room, obviously searching for something else. He stood there and observed. Something looked odd, it looked like a crack running just below the steel cabinet. He followed it towards the other desk, he dragged the desk away and saw a small back-up DVD recorder, blinking. He ejected the DVD out of the recorder and put it inside his briefcase, together with the small tape and walked out of the room. She got to the receptionist and told her that he had just received an urgent call so he was going to have to come back later.

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Back in Auckland Park, Sthandiwe was having a bad day. It felt like her lectures were taking forever. The pain on her ribs was getting worse. After her last lecture, she drove out of campus and went to the pharmacy. She didn't want strong pain meds but she had to have them because the pain was just too much. She bought the painkillers then went to McDonald's, had a burger then took the pills. Then she drove to Hyde Park. But by the time she got to the house she was already feeling sleepy, and she still had to go get the papers from Reneé. So she had to push herself. She got her gun and the handcuffs key out of her bag, dragged herself out of the car and walked inside the house. She found Kate still tied up on the chair, wet, she had peed herself. Sthandiwe just looked at her and didn't feel anything, she didn't feel for her. After hearing Reneé on the phone telling who she thought was her mother that she "got the bitch (Sthandiwe) to sign those papers", Sthandiwe had now thrown all the sympathy she had for Kate out the window. It was now clear to her that Kate knew everything that her daughter was doing and she was supporting it. She was just as bad as her daughter. Sthandiwe went up to her and removed the tape on her mouth.

-Kate: "Little girl, you better get me out of here. What kind of an animal are you? Just look at me."

-Sthandiwe: "Animal? Me? Aren't you talking about yourself and your daughter, maybe?"

-Kate: "What did she do to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Stop acting, will you? You know everything."

-Kate: "What are you talking about?"

Sthandiwe just walked away, she really had no time for that kind of game. She went upstairs to the bedroom and got her mother's old dress. Then went back downstairs. She untied Kate and told her to take off her wet dress and put that one on. Not that she was feeling sorry for her, she just didn't want the wet dress to draw attention to them in public. Kate wore the dress then Sthandiwe took the handcuffs and, with the gun drawn, she ordered Kate to walk out of the house and into the car, behind the wheel. And told her to drive to Sandton Central Park in Sandhurst. She wanted the exchange to be in a public place.

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When they got there, after 15:00, she and Kate got out of the car and walked to the park. Her gun's barrel was now on Kate's waist.

-Sthandiwe: "Now walk to sit on the bench over there. And if you do anything to try and draw attention to us trust me by the time people give you that attention my bullet would already be lodged in your waist. And I'd probably go to prison but you'd possibly be paralysed for life. Do you understand?"

-Kate: "Yes. Yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now keep walking."

Kate walked. Sthandiwe walked closely behind with her gun still to Kate's back. They got to the bench and sat down. Sthandiwe pulled out Kate's phone and called Reneé, her gun still trained on Kate. Reneé answered and she knew that it was Sthandiwe calling.

-Reneé: "I wanted you dead, bitch. So, how the fuck are you still alive?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not the dying type."

-Reneé: "Where the hell is my mother?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just tell me, how did you think this was gonna happen? Why were you so sure that you'd get my shares just by getting me to sign those papers? You know it's not that easy, right? How were my shares going to be transferred to you without my original share certificate attached to the document?"

Reneé chuckled.

-Reneé: "You have no clue, do you? When last did you see that certificate? Do you know why they say it should be kept in a safe? Bitch, your certificate is with me."

That shocked Sthandiwe. After a beat it dawned on her.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa."

That came out as a whisper.

-Reneé: "So if you think he really loves you then you're more stupid than I initially thought."

Sthandiwe could feel her anger building up but she couldn't burst and give Reneé the satisfaction. She tried to be calm.

-Sthandiwe: "Just get your ass to Sandton Central Park right now with those papers and that certificate. Then you'll get your mother."

Then she hung up.

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About an hour later, Reneé got there, driving the same Land Rover she was driving the day before. She parked the car and walked out with the envelope. She was walking across the park approaching Sthandiwe and Kate when her phone rang, and it was Sthandiwe. She answered.

-Reneé: "Why waste my mother's airtime calling me when I'm looking right at you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Don't come any closer. Just put the envelope on the bench in front of you and walk back to your car."

She didn't want Reneé to come closer to her because she didn't know what could happen. And she was not physically capable of defending herself should things go south. Plus she had no back up. And discharging her weapon in that park was the last thing she wanted.

-Reneé: "You must be crazy. I ain't doing that. Just walk my mother to me."

-Sthandiwe: "It's either you do what I tell you to do or I walk away, with your mother."

-Reneé: "Bitch, if..."

-Sthandiwe: "I have a gun with a suppressor pointed to your mother's back as we speak. So if you try anything, trust me I won't hesitate to shoot her."

-Reneé: "Okay, fine. But if you..."

Sthandiwe hung up. Reneé did as instructed. Then walked back to her car. Sthandiwe got up and told Kate to walk to the bench where the envelope was. Then she handed her the handcuffs to cuff herself to the bench. Scared, Kate did it. Sthandiwe opened the envelope and found everything inside. Satisfied, she called Reneé again and told her that she'd drop the key to the cuffs as soon as she steps on the accelerator of her car. Then she took the envelope and went back to her car, started it and drove off, dropping the key to the cuffs behind. Leaving Reneé rushing to pick it up. She drove back to the house in Hyde Park. And as soon as she parked in the driveway she got a call from Reneé, she still had Kate's phone.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes."

-Reneé: "Do you think this is over? Get this, now that you have those documents back you are as good as dead."

-Sthandiwe: "I've already been a lot of things worse than dead in my life, bitch. So if you want to threaten me, come with something better than that."

-Reneé: "It's not a threat, it's..."

Sthandiwe hung up, she really had no time to entertain her. She got out of the car and went inside the house. And as soon as she sat on the couch, visible exhaustion overtook her and she passed out on the couch.

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Reneé was still in her car by the park, her mother sitting next to her.

-Kate: "Whose car is this anyway?"

-Reneé: "Forget the car, let's get you home."

She started the car and drove off. There was an awkward silence in the car until they got to Midrand. But as they were approaching Kate's house Reneé broke the silence.

-Reneé: "Mom, is it just me or that motorbike has been following us?"

She said that looking at the rear-view mirror. Kate was reclining on the passenger seat, not paying much attention to her daughter's concern.

-Kate: "What motorbike? And why would they follow us?"

-Reneé: "Are you being serious right now? You know exactly why I'd have a tail. Just sit up, Mom, and look at what I'm seeing."

Kate sat up straight. The motorbike was coming closer in high speed. They couldn't even tell who was driving it because the driver's face was covered by the helmet. Reneé was now slowing down ready to drive through Kate's gate. But they were still looking at the motorbike. As they were still looking, the bike driver quickly pulled out a gun as s/he also slowed down passing Reneé's car on the left-hand side, shattering the car's passenger window with a bullet that ended up on Kate's chest. The whole thing happened so fast that by the time Reneé completely stopped the car, it was already done. The motorbike driver also stopped and looked at them for a second then sped off. Reneé was now crying, hysterical, as she vigorously shook her mother.

-Reneé: "Mom! Mom! No."

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In Rosebank, after 17:00, Palesa finished preparing. She was invited to a farewell party in Glevista. It was of one of her colleagues who was moving to Australia. She wanted to drive there in her own car, so she first drove to Auckland Park to leave Sthandiwe's BMW and take her TSI, as she thought it was now clean. But when she got to Sthandiwe's she didn't see the TSI in the driveway. But she got out of the car and proceeded to the front door anyway. She knocked but no one came to open. Alizwa was dead asleep upstairs. But even if he wasn't asleep he wasn't going to be able to go get the door. After a moment of incessant knocking, Palesa went back to Sthandiwe's car and drove to Glenvista. When she got to the colleague's house, the yard was already packed with cars, others were parked outside on the sidewalk. So she also parked hers there. Then got out and walked inside.

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Palesa left the party around 20:00, got inside the car and paced the German beast down the Glenvista descending slope. Just like Xolisa, she's a fast and a good driver, and she descended M68 at a brisk pace. A car in front of her immediately stopped. She swerved around it, into the oncoming lane. But another car on the oncoming lane just came out of nowhere and was heading towards her. She stepped on the brakes. Nothing. She braked again. The brakes didn't work. She pulled the emergency brake but that didn't work either. She swerved wildly, gaining momentum as the car headed downhill. She kept pumping the brake wildly without success. The car was like a crazed bullet streaking down the slope. She cut in and out of cars and hit the pavement. She bounced off the pavement wildly, careening, as she tried to control the wheel, sideswiping another car in the process. She bounced off the car, which swerved and jumped the pavement and crashed into a yard of a house. The impact threw Palesa's BMW into the oncoming lane. She swunged the wheel wildly, getting it back into the right lane. But then she

had to swing out again because there was a car in front of her that she could hit from behind. Now she was reaching the bottom of the slope in Mulbarton. And as she did, the BMW literally bounced into the air and onto a busy intersection. It swerved wildly as it hit the intersection and played crazed, spinning dodge'em with cars on the intersection. She spun the wheel and the car was suddenly on its side and then completely flipped. There was a terrific amount of screeching and honking by the other cars as Palesa was now upside down, her car wheels still spinning in the air. All her attempts to control the car hadn't worked after all.

Insert #41 Continuation

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She got home around 23:45 and got inside. Chris wasn't downstairs, she thought he was already in bed, so she went upstairs. She got to her bedroom and Chris wasn't there. She went to check him in the spare room he had used the previous night, but he wasn't there either. She stood in the passage and called his name. Nothing. Okay, that was odd and it freaked her out. She went to Alizwa's room and found him asleep.

-Sthandiwe: "Ayooo, Al."

She too was surprised that she had called him "Al" and not by his full name. He didn't respond.

-Sthandiwe: (voice raised) "Alizwa!"

His eyes snapped open.

-Alizwa: (groggy voice) "Huh. Is the house on fire? Why are you waking me up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Where's Chris?"

-Alizwa: "I wouldn't know. I only heard a car pulling up in the driveway about 2 hours ago. Then not long after that, I heard it driving off. Maybe he left in it."

-Sthandiwe: "Give me your phone."

-Alizwa: "What?"

She took it from the nightstand and handed it to him to unlock. He unlocked it and gave it back to her. She dialled Chris' number but it was still on voicemail. She dialled Palesa's, it was off too. She dialled Xolisa's, it just rang unanswered. She was now panicking. And the only thing that was going on in her head was "Oh God, maybe Reneé has him." She dialled Sihle's number and she picked up.

-Sihle: "Hello."

-Sthandiwe: "Sihle, it's me. Did I wake you?"

-Sihle: "No. Actually, we've been trying to call you on KG's phone but it keeps sending us straight to voicemail. There's been an accident. Lisa is in hospital."

-Sthandiwe: "What? What kind of accident?"

-Sihle: "Car accident. And she was driving your car."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh God. Which hospital is she in?"

She told her. She didn't ask any more questions, she just hung up and put Alizwa's phone back on the nightstand. Then rushed out of the room, leaving Alizwa asking what was going on, but she didn't answer. She got out of the house, went to the car and drove like a mad woman to the hospital.

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She got to the hospital and went to the waiting area. She found Mr and Mrs Motaung standing off to the side. Chris, Sihle and Xolisa were seated. She went to the elders first.

-Sthandiwe: "Dumelang Mme le Papa. [Hello, Mom and Dad]"

They greeted back.

-Sthandiwe: "How's she?"

-Mrs Motaung: "No one has told us anything. We're still waiting for the doctor."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh God. I hope she's okay."

She sat down, and it was only then that she addressed the others. A moment later, the doctor came.

-Mr Motaung: "Doctor, how is she?"

-Doctor: "Bruises and concussion. And she also has a cracked rib. We're gonna have to keep her here for at least a couple of days."

-Mrs Motaung: "Can we see her?"

-Doctors: "Of course. Come with me."

-Sthandiwe: "Can all of us come?"

The doctor considered that for a second. Then:

-Doctor: "She's not critical so it's okay. But she still needs to rest so I won't give you much time with her."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you, Doc."

They all followed him to Palesa's ward.

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They got in and found her awake, but still groggy. She had a bandage across her forehead, and bruises on her face. Her mother went to sit next to her on the bed. Others stood on each side of her bed.

-Mrs Motaung: "Baby, how are you feeling?"

-Palesa: (groggy) "I'll be okay, mom. I got lucky."

-Chris: "What happened, sis?"

-Palesa: "I was coming from Glenvista and I lost my brakes as I was driving down the M68."

-Mr Motaung: "You lost your brakes? How did you lose them?"

-Palesa: "I don't know, dad. Maybe someone took them."

Mr Motaung shook his head. Sthandiwe was quiet, what Palesa just said sinking in.

-Sihle: "I'm just glad you're okay, chomi."

-Xolisa: "Yeah, we all are. We were worried."

-Palesa: "Thank you all for coming. (to Sthandiwe) I'm sorry about your car, chomi. I really tried to control it but I failed. I'm sure wherever it is, it's fucked up beyond repairs."

-Sthandiwe: "Come on, chomi, it's just a car. I can have another one but we can never have another you. You are the important one here, not the car. I'm just happy you're okay. Forget the car."

-Palesa: "Thank you."

-Mr Motaung: "It's God that saved you, princess. And we are all grateful."

-Mrs Motaung: "When you get out of here I want you to come home to stay with us."

-Palesa: "Mom!"

-Mrs Motaung: "I mean it."

The doctor walked in.

-Doctor: "I'm sorry but you're gonna have to leave now. The patient has to rest."

They all told her that they'd come see her in the morning. Then walked out.

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Down the corridor.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, can I talk to you for a sec?"

-Chris: "Sure."

They walked to the side.

-Sthandiwe: "I think I know who did this to Lisa. It's Reneé, Chris."

-Chris: "But why would she do this to Lisa?"

-Sthandiwe: "Don't you see it? The accident was meant for me, Chris. Like I told you, she wanted my dad's company. In the warehouse she made me sign the papers, handing over my shares to her. That's what I was talking about when I was saying she left the warehouse with something that belongs to me. But today I got those papers back. And I think that's why she got angry and targeted my car. She wanted me dead, not Lisa."

-Chris: "Or maybe she wants you dead because you're keeping her man in your house. What did I say about having Alizwa in your house, Thandi? Now look what happened to my sister."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, please."

Insert #42

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-Chris: "No, you need to hear this, Sthandiwe. Ever since you became involved with Alizwa bad shit has been happening, but you still don't wanna distance yourself from him. Today it's my sister who's laying on that hospital bed. What's gonna happen next? Who's gonna be next in the line of fire? Huh? Me? Can't you see that by keeping ties with that guy you're not only putting yourself in danger but us too? What do you want to happen before you rid yourself of him? Before you get him out of our lives? Do you want someone to die?"

She looked at him, mouth agape, shocked by his words. She couldn't believe that he said all that, as if it was all her fault. The only word that managed to escape her mouth was:

-Sthandiwe: "Wow."

He opened his mouth to say something but she put up her hand gesturing for him to say no more.

-Sthandiwe: "I think you should sleep at your parents' tonight."

And with that she walked away, leaving him still standing there. She found the others waiting by the exit. Without even stopping, she said her goodbyes and exited the hospital, leaving them puzzled. She got to KG's Corolla and drove home. She got there and went straight to bed.

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In the morning, she woke up feeling sick, nauseous. She rushed to the bathroom and threw up into the toilet. She flushed and rinsed her mouth. Then took off her PJs and got inside the shower. After showering and lotioning herself, she used that anti-inflammatory rub on her ribs. She didn't take the tablets she got from the pharmacy the day before because she thought they were the ones making her sick. She wore casually again. Then put some make-up on her face but left the cuts uncovered this time. Then she went to get her motorbike papers from the nightstand, because she had to go report it stolen even though she had no idea why. As she opened the drawer of the nightstand she found a box of a Samsung S6 Edge (remember this story happened in 2015). It had a note attached to it "Just like the one you had, only newer. I hated being unable to call you today. Keep in touch. Love, Chris." She found herself smiling. She opened the box and turned the phone on. The battery was fully charged. She still had to do the SIM swap though and log in with her Google account to get her contacts back. But she was excited that he had bought her the phone. She got the motorbike papers and put them in her bag.

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Then she went to Alizwa's room and found him awake, thumbing his phone. She was still mad at him but she had to be civil. They were both adults after all.

-Sthandiwe: "Morning."

-Alizwa: "Hey."

-Sthandiwe: "What time is your sister gonna be here?"

-Alizwa: "She said before 7:30. Before you go to work."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. So what's gonna happen to your car?"

-Alizwa: "We'll use it to drive back to Pretoria. My sister's not coming in hers, she got a lift from her friend that works in Braam."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, that's good. Let's get you cleaned up then."

She helped him to the bathroom and left him to take a shower.

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She got out of the house and to Alizwa's car. She opened the boot and took out the bulletproof vests she had put there and put them in the back seat of KG's car. She removed the bullet slug from the one that was worn by Alizwa, then went inside and went to flush the slug down the toilet.

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When Alizwa was done taking the shower, she helped him back to the bedroom. She changed his bandages and helped him get dressed in his own clothes. When she was done:

-Sthandiwe: "Did Chris help you do all this last night?"

-Alizwa: "Imagine being helped by another man."

-Sthandiwe: "Did he?"

-Alizwa: "I had to undress and dress myself but he helped me with everything else."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay."

-Alizwa: "Please sit down next to me."

She did.

-Alizwa: "I got to know him more last night. He's a good guy and he's good for you. That said, I'm gonna step back. I know I said I was gonna fight for you. But I ain't doing that no more. You want me out of your life and that's exactly what I'm gonna give you... You are a good woman, Thandi, and you deserve a man that's gonna treat you right, a man that's not gonna lie to you. And Chris is that man."

He took her hand.

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry about everything I did to you. I really am. You didn't deserve any of it. I hurt you and I told you lies but I want you to know that my love for you was not a lie. I truly loved you, MamTshawe, still do. I had it so bad that I even found myself catching jealousy of a teenage boy... Some weeks back I went to a jewellery store and bought you a very expensive diamond bracelet. I wanted to show you how much you mean to me. But guess what happened?"

-Sthandiwe: "What happened?"

-Alizwa: "You went to sleep at KG's. Another man. I didn't know what was happening between the two of you so I got so jealous. And I ended up doing something I didn't wanna do. So stupid of me. I went home and gave the bracelet to Reneé. She too got surprised and asked me why, because I never bought her anything like that before... And she and I hadn't been making love for months but that night we did. I made love to her but the whole time I was thinking about you."

Sthandiwe was just staring at him, not saying a word.

-Alizwa: "And when I took your sheet music, my intention was not to guilt-trip you into forgiving me by using your own lyrics. But I wanted many people to hear your talent. You had told me that you spent four months writing that song but you had never played it for the masses. That didn't seem right or fair to me, so I wanted people to hear it, to hear your work. I spent two days and two nights in the apartment in Rosebank, not going home to Houghton. I lied to Reneé and told her that I wanted a quiet environment to work on the seminar I was gonna deliver in Durban but truth is I was practising that song on my baby grand. I went to Durban knowing very well that I was gonna leave the seminar early, just the day after I've delivered mine. I wanted to do something nice for you on your graduation day. And I wanted to tell you in front of all those people in The Orbit how much I love you. But I couldn't do that without coming clean about everything first."

-Sthandiwe: "But the only thing you managed to accomplish that night was to make me look like a fool in front of all those people."

-Alizwa: "And I'm sorry for that, I really am. Making you look like a fool wasn't my intention... And I'm gonna make sure that you get your sheet music back."

-Sthandiwe: "Please do. It's still my property."

-Alizwa: "Do you know what happened to my A4?"

-Sthandiwe: "Obviously not."

-Alizwa: "I sold it to my colleague for only half its market value."

-Sthandiwe: "Why did you do that?"

-Alizwa: "He always wanted it. And when I found myself wanting something from him and him seeing how badly I wanted it, he took advantage. I gave it to him because what I wanted from him was priceless."

-Sthandiwe: "What did you want from him?"

-Alizwa: "You once told me that growing up you loved Toni Braxton. And that your music is heavily influenced by her. So I thought if I took you to her Jo'burg concert you'd really be happy. And making you happy is all I ever wanted. Seeing you smile, happy, is priceless...But the tickets to her concert were already sold out and my colleague had two, he was gonna take her girlfriend. I begged him to sell them to me for double the price but he proposed that I sell him my car for half the price and he'd give me the tickets for free. I accepted the deal. But the day of the concert was Thursday last week. And you were not talking to me then. It was the very same day you told me to keep my distance from you. So I ended up not using the tickets. (he chuckled) So in the end I lost, but I really don't care because I was doing something nice for the woman I love. And given a chance, I'd do it all over again. Because I love you, Thandi."

Sthandiwe looked down. For some reason, she was believing every word he was saying. She had seen the tickets in his wallet the day before but she didn't know that he had lost his car just to get them for her. Finally, she looked up and:

-Sthandiwe: "And my share certificate? Why did you take it?"

-Alizwa: "Like I said the other day, I was no longer into Reneé's plan, I wanted out but I played along just until I could figure out a way to tell you what was going on so we could deal with her together. If I didn't do it, she wasn't gonna stop, she was just gonna find another way of doing it, a harsh way. And I didn't want that. So yeah, I did it. But I wasn't gonna let her take your shares. That's why when you told me that she got you to sign the transfer documents I got up from this bed even though I was under a lot pain. I wanted to go get those papers because I knew that she now had everything she wanted to get your shares."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, I got the papers back. The shares are still mine."

He smiled, pleased. At that moment, Sthandiwe heard what sounded like the doorbell downstairs.

-Sthandiwe: "Is that the doorbell?"

-Alizwa: "Sounds like it."

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe it's your sister, let me go check."

She left the room and went downstairs.

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She opened the door and she found this woman that looked just like Alizwa at the door. She was about 30 years old.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello. You must be Alizwa's sister."

-Her: "Yes. You can call me Yandi. And you must be Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, that's me. You can come in, Yandi."

She walked inside.

-Sthandiwe: "Your brother is upstairs and we are gonna have to help him down."

-Yandi: "Okay then, lemme not waste much of your time 'cause I'm sure you want to leave for work. Let's go get him."

They went upstairs and helped him downstairs then into the car. Sthandiwe gave Yandi the car keys, she was going to drive. And also gave her Alizwa's hotel room keycard because they were gonna have to start there to get his stuff. Yandi got in the car.

-Yandi: "Thank you for taking care of him."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't mention it."

Then Sthandiwe put Alizwa's bag in the back seat and went to Alizwa's window. He rolled it down.

-Sthandiwe: "Get well soon, okay? And once again, thank you for what you did in that warehouse."

-Alizwa: "You don't have to thank me. Seriously. I almost died that day, but to save you I'd gladly do it twice."

She just leaned in and kissed him. He responded. Yandi looked away and got out of the car. Sthandiwe broke the kiss.

-Sthandiwe: "Goodbye, Al. And all the best with everything."

-Alizwa: "Goodbye, Thandi. Take care. And again, I'm sorry for everything."

-Sthandiwe: "No, the shame is on me. I knew you were trouble from the very first day we went on a date, something just didn't seem right. But without effort you managed to bring down the walls that I built so high around my heart. It didn't take much from you, just a smile. The walls just came crumbling down and they didn't even make a sound. So yah...shame is on me."

Alizwa looked at her, visibly hurt by her words. She stepped away from the car. Yandi got inside the car, started it and backed out the driveway. Sthandiwe waved, they waved back then motored south. Sthandiwe was left standing in the driveway, feeling lost for some reason. She took a deep sigh then opened the garage and got Chris' motorbike inside. Then went inside the house. She took her bags, went to her car and drove off.

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She didn't drive to work, she first drove to Xolisa's in Hursthill. She found him in the driveway about to get in his car and drive out, going to work. The gate was opened, so she pulled up behind his car and didn't even get out, she just rolled down the window.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, XO."

-Xolisa: "What's up, Thandi?"

-Sthandiwe: "All good. Look, time is not on our side, I just came to drop off your uncle's vests."

-Xolisa: "Oh okay. But you could have given me those at work."

-Sthandiwe: "For some reason I don't want them to be seen by other people. We are not in the JMPD so we shouldn't be having those in our possession."

-Xolisa: "I get your point. So where are they?"

-Sthandiwe: "In the back seat."

Xolisa went to get them.

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you for organising those, buddy. They helped a lot. If it wasn't for one of them, Al could be dead by now. That bullet would have hit his chest."

-Xolisa: "I'm just glad I could help."

-Sthandiwe: "You're a true friend... I'll see you later, at work. Okay?"

-Xolisa: "Going somewhere right now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Talk later."

She backed out the gate before he could ask any more questions. She drove to the Brixton Police Station and reported her motorbike stolen. She asked for the copy of the police report for her insurance company, then left for work.

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In Houghton, Reneé was home, she didn't go to work, not with her mother dead. She was sitting at the desk in her home office talking on the phone with her father, Anthony Parker, after calling all her other relatives and family friends.

-Anthony: "Why are you telling me this, Reneé? Am I going to bring her back to life?"

-Reneé: "Dad! How could you be do cruel? She was my mother."

-Anthony: "Yeah, she was your mother not mine. She was nothing to me."

-Reneé: "She was the mother of your children, dad. Please come to the funeral as a favour to me."

-Anthony: "Fine."

He hung up, leaving Reneé looking at her phone, hurt. She took her mother's photo on the desk and looked at it.

-Reneé: "Sthandiwe did this to you, Mom, and I'm gonna make sure that she pays. I tried to have her taken out again but she's still alive. She wasn't the one driving the car. But she won't always get that lucky. I'm gonna get her and..."

She got disturbed by the sound of the intercom. She looked at the surveillance monitors on the wall and it was the cops at her gate. She let them in, then went downstairs to meet them. She thought they were the cops from Midrand, coming to talk to her about her mother's murder case. But when she saw their marked detectives' car and saw that they were from Booyens her eyes went wide.

-Reneé: "Officers, what can I do for you?"

-Officer 1: "Mrs Reneé Mdashe?"

-Reneé: "No, it's Miss Reneé Parker. I'm divorced."

-Officer 2: "I'm Detective Shepherd and this is my partner Detective Ncube from the Booyens Police Station."

-Reneé: "What is this about?"

-Det. Shepherd: "Come with us to the station and you'll find out."

-Reneé: "Are you arresting me or something?"

-Det. Ncube: "Something. If we were arresting you we'd be reading you your rights and cuffing you right now. Just come with us, we have some questions we want to ask you down at the station."

-Reneé: "Okay then. Let me just grab my phone."

She went inside, got her phone and left with the police.

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Down at the station, they got her into the interview room.

-Det. Ncube: "Not long ago you were on a wheelchair. Is that correct?"

-Reneé: "Yes."

-Det. Ncube: "Where's your wheelchair now?"

-Reneé: "What's my wheelchair got to do with anything?"

-Det. Shepherd: "Just answer the question, Miss."

-Reneé: "It's home."

-Det. Shepherd: "When's the last time you saw it?"

-Reneé: "This morning."

-Det. Shepherd: "So if we go to your house right now we'd find it there?"

-Reneé: "Gosh, I didn't know that owning a wheelchair was a crime in this country."

-Det. Shepherd: "It's not. But what you do when on it is what becomes a crime."

-Reneé: "Just tell me what this is about and stop wasting my time, okay? I have my mother's funeral to arrange."

-Det. Ncube: "This about 9 men that were shot dead in an old warehouse right here in Booyens. And your wheelchair was found at the scene."

-Reneé: "My wheelchair? How did you know that it's my wheelchair? I'm not the only one who owns a motorised wheelchair in Jo'burg."

-Det. Ncube: "We know that. And we also know that the wheelchair was custom-made, Miss Parker. And it had the manufacturer's emblem on the back. We went to the company and it turns out every item they sell has what they call a "product number". And when they sell the item they scan the number and link it with the information of the purchaser and keep the record in their database. It's for keeping records of all the items they sell and also for warranty and maintenance purposes. So that's how we

linked the wheelchair to you. They scanned the product number of the wheelchair and it sent us straight to you, Miss Parker."

-Det. Shepherd: "So tell us, how did it end up in that crime scene? And why did you lie about its whereabouts?"

Reneé looked down, fucked.

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In the afternoon, Sthandiwe got home and parked KG's car in the garage. Then, without even going inside the house, she left and walked to the car wash to get Palesa's car. The car wash had a garage space so the car spent the night in there and it was safe. She took it and drove home. As soon as she parked in her driveway her phone rang, it was Alizwa calling. She had done the SIM swap at work. She hesitated but ended up answering.

-Sthandiwe: "Al, what's up?"

-Alizwa: "Hey, I'm sorry for calling. I wasn't even sure if you now have a phone, I was just trying my luck."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh. So what's going on?"

-Alizwa: "I'm calling because I think you might wanna hear this. Reneé called, she's being held down at the Booyens Police Station."

-Sthandiwe: "She is? What for?"

-Alizwa: "For the shootings that happened in that warehouse. Apparently they found her wheelchair at the scene and she couldn't give the police a valid reason why it was there."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I remember, she left it there that day. So what are they charging her with?"

-Alizwa: "They haven't charged her with anything yet. But they are still holding her for questioning. She's the only lead they have so yah they're gonna be on her neck."

A police car pulled up behind the TSI in the driveway. Then another police van parked behind it. That completely distracted Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. Thanks for letting me know, Al. I gotta go now."

She hung up and stepped out of the car. Two male cops stepped out of the first car.

-Sthandiwe: "To what do I owe this visit from the guys in blue?"

-Officer 1: "Sthandiwe Blie?"

-Sthandiwe: "That's me. What's going on?"

-Officer 2: "We are officers from the Midrand Police Station and you have to come with us to our slice of heaven."

-Sthandiwe: (confused) "Slice of heaven? Why?"

-Officer 1: "You are a person of interest in our ongoing investigation."

-Sthandiwe: "What investigation?"

-Officer 2: "Just come with us, Miss."

-Officer 1: "But before we do that, we have a warrant to search your house and your car."

He said that handing it to her.

-Sthandiwe: "Why do you wanna search my property?"

-Officer 1: "Do you own a gun?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, I have a gun."

-Officer 1: "Is it licensed?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, it's registered. What's this about?"

-Officer 1: "It's about the murder of Kate Smith. She was shot dead outside her home in Midrand yesterday afternoon."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "What? Kate's dead?... I didn't have anything to do with that."

-Officer 2: "Just take us inside the house."

He motioned for the cops in the other van to come. Two cops stepped out of the van and they all walked inside the house.

Insert #43

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Sthandiwe let the police inside. The first two, who were detectives, went with her upstairs to the gun safe. The other two uniformed cops remained downstairs, searching. She got to her bedroom, opened the safe, took the gun out and handed it to Officer 1 who put on a glove before accepting it.

-Sthandiwe: "This is the only gun I own and I have a license for it."

Officer 2 peeked inside the safe and there was no other gun. Officer 1 looked at the gun and sniffed the barrel. Burned gun powder.

-Officer: "This gun has been fired recently."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. But it didn't shoot Kate. It was just an accidental discharge last night."

-Officer 1: (sarcastically) "Accidental discharge last night? Wow! What a coincidence."

-Sthandiwe: "It's true. It happened while I was cleaning it downstairs in the kitchen. I don't know much about guns, so I tried to clean it without unloading it first and it went off. So stupid of me but at least I didn't hurt myself."

They just stared at her. She could see that they weren't buying her story.

-Sthandiwe: "I'll show you where it happened."

She said that already making for the door. They followed her until they all got to the kitchen. She showed them the tile on the kitchen floor. And the bullet was still lodged on it.

-Sthandiwe: "There it is."

Officer 2, with a glove on, removed the bullet and put it inside an evidence bag. Officer 1 removed the magazine of the gun and checked it. He could see that only one round was used, the one that hit the tile.

-Officer 1: "We are still gonna take the gun to ballistics."

He said that putting the gun in another evidence bag.

-Sthandiwe: "Knock yourselves out."

-Officer 2: "And we still need to search the entire property."

-Sthandiwe: "Be my guests."

She was chilled because she knew that there was nothing to find inside the house. The only thing that could raise questions (even though unrelated to the case at hand) was Alizwa's bloodied clothes that were in the trash bin in the back yard, and there was no way they would look for anything there. She was also still confused as to why they came to her for Kate's murder. What did they know about her and Kate? That unsettled her.

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They searched the entire house and found nothing. And when they were done they moved outside and ordered her to open the garage. She did. The detectives got inside, the uniformed cops remained outside searching Palesa's car. She opened KG's car for the detectives to search. But as soon as they saw Chris' motorbike:

-Officer 1: "Whose motorbike is this?"

-Sthandiwe: "My boyfriend's. He left it here last night."

-Officer 2: "You also own one, right? Where is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "It got stolen yesterday."

-Officer 1: "It got stolen yesterday. Coincidence again?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know about coincidences, I'm only telling you what happened. I left it in the driveway when I went to work in the morning but when I came back later, it was gone. And I went to report it to the police this morning."

She got her handbag from the back seat of KG's car, took out the copy of the police report that she had asked for her insurance company and handed it to Officer 1. He looked at it.

-Officer 1: "You're still coming with us."

After searching KG's car they took her to their car and drove to their station in Midrand.

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Down in Booyens, René was still in the interview room with Detective Shepherd. Detective Ncube walked in with René's lawyer, a white guy with sufficient good looks, maybe 35. There was something special about the guy. Maybe it was the careless way he held his briefcase. Maybe his loosely buttoned shirt under that suit jacket or the haircut that was one week past neat. Or maybe it was something secret and hidden and waiting to explode. But whatever it was, it was there in spades.

-The Lawyer: "My client doesn't have to answer any more of your questions."

René looked at him with confused eyes.

-Det. Shepherd: "Your client..."

-The Lawyer: (interrupting) "...is being connected by only a wheelchair to a crime she knows nothing about."

-Det. Shepherd: "No. She needs to tell us how she is connected to those shootings. How did her wheelchair end up there? And one of the guys that got killed in that warehouse was one of our own. His name was Sam, by the way. He was working undercover tracking a sex trafficking ring. And he had a wife and a kid. Your client here is our only lead in this case."

-The Lawyer: "Maybe you think the shootings were between two rival rings or... whatever. But I'm gonna tell you now, my client knows nothing about sex trafficking. And it was my understanding that she was only brought in here for questioning, which you have already done. She's not under arrest. But if she is, well, you better charge her. If not, let her go."

-Det. Shepherd: "We have a right to keep her here for 48 hours before charging her with anything."

-The Lawyer: "You have nothing that puts my client in that warehouse at the time of those murders. You don't even know how that wheelchair got there. My client stopped using it two weeks ago. You didn't see her get into that warehouse, you didn't see her pulling the trigger. And you have nothing, absolutely

nothing that connects her to that bunch of criminals. Therefore, you need to release her so she could go organise her mother's funeral. Keep her here and I'll hit you with a malicious lawsuit."

-Det. Ncube: "It's okay, Shepherd. (to Reneé) You can go but this isn't over. (to the lawyer) You better make sure she doesn't leave the city."

The lawyer didn't respond to that. He just motioned for Reneé to get up and they walked out.

-Det. Shepherd: "Sam was my husband. And I'm not letting this go."

Detective Ncube just brushed her shoulder with his hand, then walked out.

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Down the passage.

-Reneé: "Who are you? Because you sure are not my lawyer."

-The Lawyer: "As of ten minutes ago, I am. And you better be grateful because I got you out of there. Your own lawyer didn't even bother to come."

-Reneé: "Question is: why?"

-The Lawyer: "Call me Greg. Mason sent me."

She reacted. Mason is the guy she was working for, the member of the human trafficking ring. She got to know the guys in the warehouse when she was still working for him. The boss (Guy 1 that tortured Sthandiwe) of those guys was also working for Mason, well as a freelancer, getting him the girls. Reneé had called in a favour from him, to help her kidnap Sthandiwe because she knew that he had the means and the roof. Mason didn't know anything about that, or at least that's what she thought.

-Reneé: "Mason? How did he know I was here?"

-Greg: "Obviously he's been keeping tabs on you. And he didn't want you talking to the police and maybe end up implicating him and the ring. So he sent me to get you out."

-Reneé: "You also work for him?"

-Greg: "I'm not a fan of rhetorical questions...What you need to do is keep your mouth shut, I'm sure you know what I mean, and just focus on getting him what he wants. Or he'll get you."

Reneé kept quiet and they walked to his car, got in and he drove off.

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In the Midrand Police Station, it was Sthandiwe who was in the hot seat in the interrogation room. The two detectives were sitting in front of her at the table. She was a picture of calm though.

-Officer 2: "Do you need your mouthpiece present? It's your right."

-Sthandiwe: "Lawyers are for guilty people, Detective, I'm not. What's your first question?"

-Officer 1: "Miss Blie, where were you yesterday around 16:20?"

-Sthandiwe: "In my house in Hyde Park, resting."

-Officer 2: "Resting? Weren't you supposed to be still at work?"

-Sthandiwe: "I left work early because I wasn't feeling well."

-Officer 1: "Where do you work?"

-Sthandiwe: "UJ."

-Officer 1: "In Auckland Park. But when you weren't feeling well you drove about 30 minutes to rest in Hyde Park whereas you have a house that's only a few minutes away from campus. Tell me, does that make sense to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Is that a crime?"

She asked that only because she was buying herself some time to come up with an explanation for her being in Hyde Park. It's not like she could tell them about Kate, Reneé and the exchange, she'd only be implicating herself.

-Officer 2: "We ask the questions here, you answer."

-Sthandiwe: "You see the cuts on my face? I was mugged on Saturday. I tried to fight the bastards off and I ended up with this pretty face and bruised ribs."

She said that getting up and lifted her T-shirt, showing her bruised ribs.

-Sthandiwe: "The ribs were aching like hell yesterday, that's why I left work early. I drove to Hyde Park because I wanted an ice pack to put on them, it works to ease the pain. I had a couple of those in Hyde Park so buying another one wouldn't have made financial sense. So I drove there to get one and to also rest in a quiet environment. In Auckland Park...well, my boyfriend was there and we had a fight in the morning before I left for work."

Obviously she was lying, even about the ice pack. She had only bought the ice pack she was talking about that morning. When she was coming from the Brixton Police Station she passed by Clicks and bought it before going to work. Good thing she had unwrapped it and used it at work, so it didn't look new anymore.

-Officer 2: "An ice pack?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I'm sure you saw it in the back of my car when you were searching it. I took it with me to work this morning because I put in on my ribs every 2 hours."

Both detectives just stared at her blankly. She was not sure if they were buying her story. She returned the blank look, not wanting to give away that she was lying.

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Officer 1 walked out of the room and returned with an open laptop. He put it on the table and turned it so the display could face Sthandiwe then pressed play. A video started playing, in fact it was a camera footage. A footage of someone on a motorbike shooting at Reneé's Rover. She immediately saw that it was her motorbike, and the registration number was clearly visible, confirming that it was really her bike. Her eyes widened as she realised what KG had done. And she could see that it was him on the bike.

-Sthandiwe: "That's my bike."

-Officer 1: "Exactly. Hence you're here."

She chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "Do you honestly think that's me? I mean come on, even a blind man can see that's not me. That is a guy."

-Officer 2: "Is it? How can you tell? The face is not visible."

-Sthandiwe: "Can't you see that the person is wearing men's clothes? The physic is also of a man. Even the shoes are at least three sizes bigger than mine."

-Officer 1: "It wouldn't be the first time a woman wears men's clothes just to throw the police off."

-Sthandiwe: "Fair enough. But really, I know I'm tall but hey seriously, this guy in this footage is way taller than me. Can I make myself taller just to throw off the police then shrink myself again? I'm telling you, that is not me."

The detectives looked at each other, both with the same sinking feeling. They were seeing her point.

-Sthandiwe: "I told you that my motorbike was stolen and I showed you proof. So whoever that person in this footage is, is the same person that stole my bike."

-Officer 1: "Did you know Kate?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I didn't. I only knew of her."

-Officer 1: "What about her daughter Reneé? Do you know her?"

-Sthandiwe: "Again, I only know of her."

-Officer 1: "You know of her because you stole her husband"

-Sthandiwe: "I stole no one's husband. They are divorced."

-Officer 2: "Divorced but still together."

-Sthandiwe: "And I wasn't aware of any of that when I first dated Alizwa."

-Officer 2: "And when you got to know, what did you do?"

-Sthandiwe: "I ended the relationship."

-Officer 1: "Would it be fair to say you killed Kate to hurt Reneé because her husband ended the affair with you when she found out? Jilted lover."

-Sthandiwe: "No, it'd be stupid. Now I can see that you've been talking to Reneé. Well let me tell you, if Reneé told you that Alizwa dumped me then she's lying. I'm the one who ended things with her husband or boyfriend or whatever he is. And I've moved on. You've heard me talking about my boyfriend, right? Well, I was referring to someone else. The man I am with now, not Alizwa. And if I wanted to hurt Reneé, which I don't, I wouldn't go after her mother. I'd go straight to her and do what I want. Her mother had nothing to do with any of this."

-Officer 2: "So you say someone stole your bike and went to commit this crime?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes."

-Officer 1: "Out of all the bikes they could steal in Jo'burg they stole yours, the woman who has a beef with the daughter of the deceased. Another coincidence?"

-Sthandiwe: "What's with you and the word 'coincidence'? What, you just heard it? Like I said earlier, I don't know anything about coincidences but I'm only telling you exactly what happened. You're the detective here, not me, so figure out the rest... Can I go home now? I need to use that ice pack right about now, if you know what I mean."

They had no reason to keep her, so:

-Office 1: "Go. But this is not over."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, just make sure that next time you don't bring me down here unless you're ready to read me my rights."

She got up and walked to the door. They followed her. And they took her back home.

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Immediately when Sthandiwe got home, she went to KG's car and took out the ice pack, she really needed it, no kidding. Then went inside Palesa's car, put the ice pack on her ribs, then drove to Palmridge. Angry. On the way Chris kept calling but she ignored his calls. She got to Palmridge and parked on the street. She removed the ice pack then got out of the car and entered KG's gate. KG was playing soccer in the driveway with one of his two younger brothers. The ball came in Sthandiwe's direction as she was walking through the gate and she put her foot on it.

-Sthandiwe: (to the younger brother) "Hey, Khumo, could you please go inside? I need to speak to your brother alone."

He didn't protest, he nodded and went inside.

-KG: "ST, what's up?"

She just strided towards him. In a speed of lightning she had reached him. Before he could say anything more, her mae geri (front kick) had connected with his stomach. He stumbled backwards and bent down, his hands on his stomach. As he was still in that position, coughing, her mawashi geri (roundhouse kick) hit the side of his face and threw him on the ground. Then she quickly grabbed him by his T-shirt, dragged him up and pinned him to the wooden garage door that was behind him. Her forearm wedged under his throat.

-Sthandiwe: "Why the fuck did you do something that you knew could land me in hot water? Huh?"

-KG: (chocking) "I'm...sorry."

-Sthandiwe: "Wrong answer."

She pressed deeper into his throat. He didn't do anything, just stared at her with his deep dark eyes. Soon, he started to weaken. She pushed off of him and he fell on his knees, catching his breath, coughing.

-Sthandiwe: "That was for threatening my freedom. And why didn't you fight back? Is it because a gun is the only thing you know?"

-KG: (still catching breath) "No. I don't...hit women. But yeah, you've just... proven to be...way out...of my league... when it comes to... hand to hand combat."

-Sthandiwe: "Get up and follow me."

She led the way out of the gate, KG following behind.

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They both got inside Palesa's car. She didn't want KG's brothers and MaKhumalo to hear what they were going to talk about.

-Sthandiwe: "Why did you do it? Why did you use my motorbike to go kill René's mother? Murder, KG? Murder? Can you imagine how I felt when the police showed me that footage?"

-KG: "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know that they had a camera outside their gate. I only saw it after I had released the bullet. That's why I asked you to go report the bike stolen. I knew the police would come for you. I didn't know what else to do."

-Sthandiwe: "How did you know where her house was?"

-KG: "You had my phone so I followed your movements, using that app I showed you. When we were at the hospital yesterday morning and you said you were gonna have to go somewhere after work and that you'd need four wheels, I suspected that you were up to something. That's why I didn't ask for my phone back. I followed you and I was right, you were up to something."

She was just staring at him, still fighting her anger.

-KG: "That other night when you came to drop me here I asked you to go use the gun that was on your waist, and I meant go use it on Reneé. But when you looked at me, I could see it in your eyes that you wouldn't do it. And the only way I could feel better about my daughter's death was if someone paid for it, I told you that. My daughter died because she couldn't receive better medical care. And that was Reneé's fault and she had to pay for it. She took my daughter away from me and I took her mother. An eye for an eye."

-Sthandiwe: "You know what your problem is, KG? You act first then think later."

-KG: "I know and I'm sorry for dragging you into this but I'm not sorry for killing Kate... That night you left here, I checked your movements in that app and I saw that you went to Midrand then to your house in Hyde Park. It was late at night and that could only mean one thing - whatever you were doing was not exactly legal. Then yesterday, after you left work, you went to Hyde Park again. I thought you had kidnapped Reneé and went to keep her in that house. I thought the house you went to in Midrand that night was hers. So I followed you, at a safe distance of course, with hopes of following her from you and back to her house. And take her out on the way. Because I know that the security is tight in those houses, I wasn't gonna be able to just walk through the front gate of her house to get to her... You know why I did all of that? Because I knew that if you had her, you wouldn't kill her. I knew that you'd let her go. Even if you weren't gonna release her yesterday, I knew that you would release her eventually. And I was right. Problem is you're too soft, Thandi. You don't have the guts. I saw how you cried over those motherfuckers that you had to kill in that warehouse... I wanted to erase Reneé but when I saw you in the park and saw that you actually had her mother, I changed my plans. Removing her mother was way better than removing her. So I followed them back home and when we got to their quiet street, I did it. Not knowing that they had a camera that covered the street."

-Sthandiwe: "How did you know that the woman I was with at the park was Reneé's mother?"

-KG: "Oh, come on, I knew Kate. Her divorce from the famed Anthony Parker, Reneé's father, 10 years ago wasn't exactly a private affair. It was all over."

She told him that his actions almost cost Palesa her life. That Reneé must have been angry about the murder of her mother and because she thought it was Sthandiwe who did it, she retaliated by sending her people after her car. He was shocked and sincerely remorseful. And he begged Sthandiwe to not tell anyone about what he did, especially Chris. He also promised to go see Palesa in hospital the following day because it was already late and visiting hours were over.

Sthandiwe's anger was now subsiding.

-Sthandiwe: "Next time, just think before you act. Okay? Don't let anger control you."

-KG: "I know."

-Sthandiwe: "So where's the bike now?"

-KG: "I got rid of it."

-Sthandiwe: "You do know that my insurance might not cover this, right? And that bike cost me a lot of money. And now it's gone, just like that."

-KG: "Yeah, I know that I've cost you. And I'm sorry, gazi. I really am."

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay. I gotta go now."

He hopped out of the car, feeling like shit, he had let his sister down. She started the car and drove home. On the way she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to the footage of her driving KG's car through Kate's gate on Sunday night. She knew that they had a camera but that didn't bother her on that night because she was not hiding what she was doing. Kate left the house already aware that she was being kidnapped. And she let Renéé know that she had her mother, knowing very well that she wouldn't involve the police. But now there was murder that was being tied to her and that changed everything.

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When she got home she found Chris sitting in the front porch.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris."

-Chris: "Hey. Been calling you and you haven't been taking my calls."

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I got so busy at work. How's Lisa? I couldn't go see her today I was really busy."

-Chris: "She's doing okay. She'll be out the day after tomorrow, on Thursday."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad to hear that."

She didn't want to get into the fact that she was taken by the police for questioning, at least not on that day. So she chose to lie about being busy at work. She opened the door and they walked inside. Chris took her hand and led her to the couch. They sat down.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, I'm sorry about the way I talked to you last night. I wasn't..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "No, don't be sorry, you were right. And maybe I needed to hear it. My involvement with Alizwa has been nothing but a problem. It brought danger into my life and into the lives of everyone around me. But now he's gone, he left this morning and he is out of my life for good."

You were right, keeping ties with him was gonna keep Reneé on my back. She was gonna keep coming after me... And you also warned me about this danger several weeks ago but I didn't pay attention."

-Chris: (confused) "Weeks ago?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Through a dream. You told me that I was in danger and I must run. I just didn't know what the danger was at the time but now I do. Only difference is I'm not gonna run, I'm gonna face it straight on."

-Chris: "Right or not, I shouldn't have talked to you in that manner. Thandi, I made a promise to you. That I'd never leave your side. That I'd help you deal with Reneé. So that's exactly what I should be doing, not fighting with you. You might have gotten involved with Alizwa willingly but you didn't exactly invite all of this, it found you. And I was wrong for implying that my sister is in hospital because of you. It's not your fault, sthandwa sam."

-Sthandiwe: "Yah, well..."

-Chris: "And Thandi, trust me, even though you have cut ties with Alizwa, that doesn't mean Reneé is gonna stop coming after you. If Alizwa doesn't want her, she'll always think it's your fault. And as long as your father's company shares are still yours, she won't stop coming at you."

-Sthandiwe: "So what are you saying?"

-Chris: "I'm saying I'll keep my promise and help you deal with Reneé. We'll find a way to neutralise her, together."

Sthandiwe didn't like the sound of that. She got up and went to the kitchen. Chris followed her.

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She drank water right out of the faucet. Then leaned on the sink with her back. Chris came to stand in front of her.

-Sthandiwe: "I appreciate the gesture, Chris, but no. I can't let you do that. Fighting Reneé is my mission, so I'm gonna do it alone."

-Chris: "Thandi, we are partners. That means there's no 'my' anymore, there's only 'ours'. Reneé is dangerous so I won't let you deal with her alone."

-Sthandiwe: "Exactly. She's dangerous, that's why I don't want you to be involved. I'll do this alone, I have nothing to lose. But you, Chris, you have a family that loves you and still wants you. And I'm not gonna be the one who takes you away from them. I love you too much to do that. I can't put you in danger."

-Chris: "This is not up for discussion, Thandi. I'm not gonna let you do this alone. I'm not gonna let you risk your life. That woman is dangerous. Do you ever stop to think how I would feel if I lost you? You have no idea how much you mean to me, Thandi. No idea. I'm doing this with you and that's final."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay then. Me and you, together."

-Chris: "Yeah, together...I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "And I love you too."

He kissed her. They kissed. The kiss got heated and they were soon tugging at each other's clothes. She was unbuckling his belt when he pulled back.

-Chris: "No, babe. Your ribs."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry about them."

She said that kissing him again. He responded. And he lifted her off the ground and carried her upstairs, bridal style.

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They got to the bedroom and he threw her on the bed. They kissed, undressing each other. Until:

-Chris: "Babe, we can't. Sorry, I have forgotten that we don't have condoms."

-Sthandiwe: (disappointed) "Yah, that. It's...it's okay, let's just sleep."

That was Chris, he never did it without protection, not even once. It didn't matter how rock hard he'd be, if he had no protection, he wouldn't dive in. That's how responsible he was. Sthandiwe was so disappointed but it was what it was. They just cuddled, she thanked him for the phone, and they talked about this and that until they fell asleep.

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In the morning she opened her eyes and found Chris staring at her.

-Chris: (smiling) "Morning, sthandwa sam."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling too) "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

-Chris: "Okay. You?"

-Sthandiwe: "With you by my side, I felt safe. But now I gotta get up and get ready for work."

She sat up straight on the bed.

-Sthandiwe: "Speaking of work, when are you going back to Cape Town?"

-Chris: "I took this whole week off. I'm going back on Sunday. But as soon as my things get sorted, I'll come back this side. I want to leave Cape Town for good. I want to come back home, work here and be close to you."

-Sthandiwe: "Really?"

-Chris: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: "I'd really love that, babe."

She leaned in and pecked his lips. Then got out of bed.

-Sthandiwe: "Unlike you, I'm not on leave so lemme go get ready."

-Chris: "I'll make you breakfast."

-Sthandiwe: "You are a darling."

She went to the bathroom. He also got out bed, he was in his boxers, so he just put on his vest and went to the other bathroom. That's where the toothbrush he used when he slept over was. He brushed his teeth, washed his hands and rinsed his face. Then went downstairs to make breakfast for his woman.

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When Sthandiwe was done with her shower, she got dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers, again. It's hard to dress up when you're all stressed up. She did minimal make-up and let her hair down. She took the NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) she bought from the pharmacy for her ribs. Then went down to the kitchen. Chris had made eggs, sausages and beans, no bread. She plated for them and put the plates on the breakfast table. She went to sit down. Chris sat down as well.

-Chris: "I know it's not full but it's better than going on an empty stomach hey."

-Sthandiwe: "Ey, these eggs. Did you check their 'best before date'?"

-Chris: "Yes, they are fine. If they were off I wouldn't have used them."

-Sthandiwe: "It's just that they don't smell so good."

-Chris: "What are you talking about? These eggs are fine."

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe it's the pills I just took...I'm sorry, babe, but I can't eat. I'll grab something at work later."

She got up and rushed up the stairs. Leaving Chris puzzled.

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She got to her bedroom and rushed straight to the en-suite bathroom and threw up into the toilet. She rinsed her mouth and walked out, to the bedroom.

-Sthandiwe: "Fucking pills."

Chris walked in.

-Chris: "Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm fine. It's these pills I got from the pharmacy that are making me sick."

-Chris: "Maybe you should stop taking them and consult your doctor."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Anyway, what will you be doing today?"

-Chris: "I'm gonna go visit Lisa in the hospital then go see my friend, Sakhe, at his workplace in Rosebank. Why do you ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just asking. If you feel like using four wheels you can use Lisa's car. You saw where I put the keys last night, right?"

-Chris: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, let me go then. I'll see you later after I've gone to see Lisa."

-Chris: "Have a great day."

They kissed. And she left. She took her ice pack from Palesa's car and got into KG's car, her bags were still there because she didn't take them out the day before. She started the car and drove to work.

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Chris was left sitting on the bed in the bedroom. His phone rang, he didn't recognise the number but he answered.

-Chris: "Hello."

-Caller: "Chris, it's Alizwa. I got your number from KG. Please don't hang up."

-Chris: "What's up?"

-Alizwa: "I know that we aren't friends but please do me this one favour. Protect Thandi. As long as Reneé is still out there, she's not safe. I know how dangerous she is. Please keep Thandi safe."

-Chris: "I hear you. But you don't have to worry. Protecting Thandi is something I'll always do. You didn't even need to ask."

-Alizwa: "Okay, that's good...ummh, that'll be all. I gotta go."

-Chris: "Sure."

They both hung up.

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Sthandiwe got to work and parked KG's Corolla in the parking lot just as Prof Jansen was also parking his car in his usual spot. They both got out of their cars and walked towards their building.

-Prof Jansen: "Blie."

-Sthandiwe: "Good morning, Prof."

-Prof Jansen: "You've been using this Corolla this week. What happened to your car?"

-Sthandiwe: "You remember me saying I got mugged this past weekend? Well, it was actually a carjacking. They took my car."

She didn't want her colleagues to know about her personal stuff. It was her business, she didn't owe any of them any explanations.

-Prof Jansen: "Oh, no. But your insurance is gonna sort you out, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "I haven't even submitted a claim yet. But I will."

That actually reminded her that she hadn't even filed a police report yet.

-Prof Jansen: "Do it fast. Anyway, I really need your answer about the project."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh well, Prof, here's the answer: I don't wanna be part of any project any time soon, as myself or as a supervisor. I really need a break. I've been studying since I was 6 years old. So yeah, I need a break."

-Prof Jansen: "Then that means you won't be a professor any time soon."

-Sthandiwe: "And that doesn't bother me at all."

-Prof Jansen: (smiling) "Alright, ghetto girl."

-Sthandiwe: "What?"

-Prof Jansen: "Yeah. You are always dressed so ghetto these days."

Okay, the language was funny coming from him.

-Sthandiwe: "Well then, maybe I am ghetto."

They both laughed as they entered their building.

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As soon as she got to her office she called Alizwa.

-Alizwa: "Hey. Is everything okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, everything's fine."

-Alizwa: "Thing is I wasn't expecting you to call."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm calling to ask about Reneé. What happened with her down at the police station yesterday?"

-Alizwa: "Like I said, they were only questioning her. Then they let her go."

-Sthandiwe: "Unlike her, we didn't leave anything that could lead back to us in that warehouse, right?"

-Alizwa: "No, I don't think we did. Anyway, why didn't you tell me that Reneé can walk? Why didn't you tell me that she walked out of that warehouse on her own two feet?"

-Sthandiwe: "You mean you really didn't know? You were living with that woman, Al. Sharing a bed with her."

-Alizwa: "Clearly she mastered the art of deceit a long time ago. As it turns out there's a lot I didn't know about her."

-Sthandiwe: "Yah hey."

She said that thinking about what Reneé had told her in that warehouse, that she was working for some guy that is a member of a human trafficking ring, and that Alizwa didn't know anything about it. But she wasn't going to be the one to tell him, so she quickly changed the topic.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, another thing. I need to ask. The day I first met you, I already know that you had the battery cables in my car cut just so we could meet and you could give me a lift, scoring yourself some points. Now my question is, did you do it yourself or did you ask someone else to do it for you?"

-Alizwa: "I didn't do it myself. I couldn't risk being spotted. Ted did it for me. And he's an expert in getting into people's cars discreetly."

-Sthandiwe: "So it's possible that Reneé also used him to temper with the brakes of my car, landing Palesa in hospital?"

-Alizwa: "Is that what happened? Is that what you weren't telling me the other night?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. So is it possible?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah, it is."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. That'll be all, thanks."

She hung up, without even asking how he was doing, if he was recovering well.

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Ted got to Reneé's Houghton mansion and parked in the driveway. He got out and made his way to the front door. Reneé opened for him and without saying a word she turned and walked across the house to the back door. Ted followed behind. She walked out into the backyard and went to stand by the swimming pool. Ted came to stand next to her. She stared into the pool, arms folded.

-Reneé: "You know why I like swimming pool water?"

-Ted: "Why?"

-Reneé: "No matter the weather, pool water is always calm."

-Ted: "Why does it sound like you're talking about yourself? You've just lost your mother but look at you, all calm."

-Reneé: "Keeping a cool head helps you make right decisions... And, Ted, you need to redeem yourself to me. You messed up on your last assignment."

-Ted: "I know. But Sthandiwe's luck is gonna run out eventually."

-Reneé: "Turns out it's a good thing she didn't die. Mason is still breathing down my neck, he still wants those shares. And he means business, he don't play."

-Ted: "You told me you already tried to get the shares by force but failed. So how are you gonna get them now?"

-Reneé: "That's where you come in. Like I said, you need to redeem yourself, Ted. That bitch is tough, she's not gonna give me those papers back easily. So tell me, in a situation like this what's my play?"

Ted chuckled.

-Ted: "That's funny. You blackmail me then ask me 'my play'?"

-Reneé: "It's not personal, Ted. (looking at him) But just know that I am and I will always do what I gotta do to get off of that man's clutches. So answer me. What's my play?"

-Ted: "What I got to learn about Sthandiwe over the period I've been following her is that she's all hard outside but at heart, she's a soft touch. She can't stand to watch the ones she loves get hurt. So if you want her to do what you want her to do, get to her loved ones. That's your play. Your only play."

Reneé kept quiet for a moment, staring back into the pool. Then:

-Reneé: "I have someone in mind."

-Ted: "Pretty boy?"

-Reneé: "Pretty boy."

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After her lectures, Sthandiwe started setting the test paper that was going to be written the next day. When she was done she printed it. She went to collect the printouts from the print room then passed by Xolisa's office. She knocked and pushed the door.

-Sthandiwe: "XO."

He was busy on his laptop.

-Xolisa: "What happened to knocking and waiting for a response before entering?"

-Sthandiwe: "Let it go, buddy, will you?"

-Xolisa: "Okay. So what's up?"

She went to sit on the chair in front of his desk and put the papers on the desk.

-Sthandiwe: "Cops are looking into what happened in that warehouse. And they took Reneé in for questioning yesterday. Then they let her go."

-Xolisa: "Reneé? Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "They traced the wheelchair she left in there back to her. Her wheelchair at the crime scene. See?"

-Xolisa: "She left her wheelchair there? She's not so smart, is she?"

-Sthandiwe: "I just hope nothing leads back to us hey."

-Xolisa: "It'd be great if they could arrest Reneé. She'd be out of your life for a very long time and you'd be safe."

-Sthandiwe: "But that's not gonna happen, is it? A wheelchair is not enough evidence against her."

Xolisa kept quiet, staring up at the ceiling, and idea forming.

-Xolisa: "Who's the lead investigating officer?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know. Why do you ask?"

-Xolisa: "Just find out for me."

-Sthandiwe: "What are you gonna do?"

-Xolisa: "Don't ask. Just do it."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, fine."

She got up and took the papers.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm going to see Palesa in hospital. Wanna come with me? But I'm gonna start in Brackendowns."

-Xolisa: "Ummh...not now. I gotta finish up here first. I'll meet you there during visiting hours."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay then. Later."

She walked out and went to her office. She was done for the day so she just left the papers and walked out. She got to her car and drove home to get her car papers. When she got there, Palesa's car was not there and so was Chris, meaning he had left in it. She got the papers then drove to Brackendowns Police Station, where her wrecked car was towed to. The cops gave her a hard time telling her that she was supposed to have come to make the report within 24 hours of the accident. She told them she wasn't around and she wasn't the one driving the car, and that the driver couldn't come to do the report because she's in hospital. They did what they could with her but told her that Palesa had to come as well. She left and drove to Netcare Mulbarton to see Palesa.

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Funny enough, when she got there, Sihle and Xolisa were also arriving in their separate cars. They all parked in the parking lot. Sthandiwe got out of her car first and went to Sihle's. Sihle got out. They hugged briefly.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, chomi."

-Sihle: "How are you, chomi yam? [my friend]"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm alive. You?"

-Sihle: "Same here. And I'm happy Lisa is going home tomorrow."

Xolisa got to them.

-Sihle: "X."

-Xolisa: "Sihle."

-Sihle: "Is it just me or you're getting finer by the day?"

He laughed.

-Xolisa: "It's just you, dear. If that were true there'd be a line of women waiting to get a piece of me. But nah, it's not happening."

-Sihle: "That bad?"

-Xolisa: "Or maybe you could hook me up with your friend Palesa."

-Sthandiwe: (chuckling) "Don't even go there, buddy. Lisa is in a serious relationship."

-Xolisa: "Thandi, how come I only got to put a face to her name this past weekend? I mean, I got to know Sihle a while ago but not her."

-Sthandiwe: "That's because she doesn't like visiting me in the office and you don't visit me much at home. She doesn't like the smell of the chemicals that are always used in the open lab in front of my office."

-Xolisa: "Now imagine being in hospital. The hospital smell. I'm sure she's already sick and tired of being here."

-Sihle: "You should have heard her yesterday. She can't wait to go home."

-Sthandiwe: "Let's go see her."

They all made for the hospital entrance.

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When they got outside Palesa's hospital room they could hear her laughing inside, a painful laugh.

-Palesa: (from inside) "You're so cruel. How can you make me laugh this much when you know that I have a cracked rib?"

They walked inside and found her with KG. He was sitting on the bed by her feet. They greeted.

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't know you two were best buddies."

-Palesa: "As of a few minutes ago, we are. He's actually so funny."

-KG: (smiling) "And her brother likes me too. So I'm practically family now."

-Sthandiwe: (joking) "Hell, no. I don't share. You're my brother, no one else's."

She went to sit on his lap and wrapped her arm around his neck.

-KG: "I love it when you become all possessive of me."

-Sthandiwe: "So Chris was just here?"

-KG: "No, I saw him earlier. He called then went to see me at my place. I didn't go to work so yah he found me home. He hadn't seen me since my daughter's passing, so he went to..."

He stopped, couldn't bring himself to say anything more about his daughter. Sthandiwe brushed his shoulder, seeing that he was still hurt by his daughter's passing.

-Xolisa: "I'm sorry about your daughter, bro. And I'm sorry I didn't even call. Thing is I don't even have your number."

-Sihle: "Yeah, me too, I'm sorry. I do have your number, Chris gave it to me that other night when we wanted to talk to Thandi. But I couldn't bring myself to calling you. I thought it'd be better if I talked to you face to face and pass my sincere condolences."

-KG: "It's okay, guys. I know you had to focus on your friend here, Palesa. You don't have to worry about me. I'm okay."

They nodded.

-Sihle: "And how is she? (taking Palesa's hand) How are you feeling, chomi?"

-Palesa: "I'm okay and ready to go home. But my rib hurts especially now that KG made me laugh."

-KG: "I'm sorry, I just wanted to cheer you up... What I hate is that you're here because of Reneé."

-Palesa: "What? (looking at Sthandiwe) Is that true? Am I here because Reneé wanted payback? She took my brakes to get to you? Collateral damage?"

That made Sthandiwe a little uncomfortable. She didn't want Palesa to know, at least not yet. And KG just blurted it out. She got up from KG's lap and swallowed before she spoke.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. I was the target. I think she thought I was the one driving that car. I'm sorry, chomi."

-KG: "It's also possible that she knew that it was you who was driving that car, Palesa. But targeted you to hurt Thandi."

-Palesa: "And now she knows that I'm not dead. So what will be her next move?"

-Sthandiwe: "For now I think she's gonna lay low. She's still dealing with her mother's death."

-KG: "Then we should strike now that she's down. When an enemy is down you finish them off. You don't wait for them to get back up and regroup."

He was just making Sthandiwe angry.

-Sthandiwe: "How about you forget about revenge on Reneé, KG, and grieve for your daughter?"

-KG: (firmly) "No, ST, that's no longer an option. Palesa is in this hospital because of her. And she's not gonna stop. She could be planning something as we speak."

-Xolisa: "If KG is right, then Reneé will start looking for someone else she can use to get to you, Thandi. And it could be any of us in here."

-KG: "Exactly. So I say let's go out there and make that psycho bitch regret the day she was born. We gotta get to her before she gets to us."

-Sihle: "Are you sure you're up for that?"

-KG: "I wouldn't be suggesting it if I wasn't."

-Sihle: "After everything you've been through?"

-KG: "Sitting around grieving is not gonna help. Kicking Renee's ass will. Question is, are you all up for it?"

KG was really annoying Sthandiwe with his hot head. She changed the topic by asking about Palesa's rib. They all ended up talking to and about Palesa, and dropped the talk about Reneé. That's what they were there for anyway. They sat with her until the doctor came and told them to leave because visiting hours were over.

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Down the hallway.

-Sthandiwe: "KG, I'll take you home. So you can go ahead with Xolisa but wait for me by the exit, I still want to talk to Sihle."

-KG: "Sure."

He and Xolisa left, leaving Sthandiwe with Sihle.

-Sthandiwe: "Did you see your bank balance? I made a transfer this morning."

-Sihle: "Yeah. And I told myself that I was gonna thank you in person. But it's a lot, chomi. I wasn't expecting that amount for the services I offered."

-Sthandiwe: "You deserve it, chomi, and more. And I still need your services."

-Sihle: "Yeah?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. There's an investigation on what happened in that warehouse in Booyens."

-Sihle: "Really? I thought the police would just think it was a gang deal gone wrong, and just let it go. I mean who cares when criminals shoot each other? They are actually helping the police - less criminals to deal with."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, that's not the case. So I need you to get me the name of the lead investigator on the case. Get me everything you can about him or her."

-Sihle: "I won't even ask why. But consider it done."

They walked to the exit and found KG and Xolisa waiting for them. Sthandiwe took KG, they said their goodbyes and went to his car. Xolisa and Sihle left in their cars too.

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On the way to Palmridge.

-Sthandiwe: "Seriously, KG, there were plenty of ways of getting your fucking revenge on Reneé. Ways that didn't involve shooting Anthony Parker's ex wife."

-KG: (calm) "ST, you've got your methods. I've got mine. Let's just leave it at that."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, you have your methods. And courtesy of those methods I now have the police spotlight shining on me. One wrong move, from me or any of you, I might find myself behind bars. So please, gazi, keep a cool head. Don't do anything stupid."

-KG: (with a not-so-convincing tone) "Fine."

-Sthandiwe: "And I know why you wanna go after Reneé. You're feeling guilty because you know that Palesa is in hospital because Reneé was retaliating on me after you shot her mother. But let me tell you, what you want to do is not gonna make you feel any better. My advice, just let it go."

KG didn't respond, he just looked out the window. Sthandiwe drove in awkward silence until they got to KG's. She dropped him off and drove home.

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When she got home, it was before 20:00, Palesa's car was not in the driveway and the lights were off in the house. So she knew that Chris was still not in. She opened the garage and parked the Corolla inside. Then got into the house using the spare key she took in the morning, then went upstairs to the bedroom. She threw herself on the bed, pulled out her phone and called Chris. But his phone sent her straight to voicemail. She sighed and hung up. A moment later, her phone rang, it was a private number. She answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello."

Silence.

-Sthandiwe: "Who's this?"

-Caller: "I'm the woman who has something that belongs to you. Or maybe I should say someone."

She recognised that voice.

-Sthandiwe: "Reneé?"

-Reneé: "Just the day before yesterday it was you making a call of this nature to me but now the tables have turned."

-Sthandiwe: "What are you talking about?"

-Reneé: "I have Chris. If you want him returned to you unharmed, you'll give me back those signed share transfer documents. You get stupid, he gets dead."

She hung up leaving Sthandiwe open-mouthed. The fear that she had the other night had now come to be a reality.

Insert #46

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Sthandiwe was floored, not knowing what to do. But she sure wasn't going to call and tell anyone about Chris' kidnapping at that point, especially his parents. The last thing she needed was her friends telling her "I told you so" or Chris' parents blaming her for their son's kidnapping. She decided to sleep on it, in the morning she'd wake up knowing exactly what to do. She changed into her PJs and got to bed. She plugged earphones into her iPod and listened to music. As much as it helps when she wants to distract her mind, it also helps her focus.

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In the morning she got up, made her bed and went to take a shower. She had to get ready for work, Chris' kidnapping didn't mean the Earth had stopped revolving, she still had responsibilities. She got dressed casually, which was now a norm for her. She tied her hair into a low ponytail then put a cap on.

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Meanwhile, Chris was being kept in a bedroom somewhere, tied to a chair but not gagged, meaning wherever he was his screams wouldn't be heard by anyone. Reneé walked in and went to him. He was seeing her for the first time but he recognised her face from a photo.

-Chris: "Reneé."

-Reneé: "Oh, you know me. Good. Now I won't waste time introducing myself."

-Chris: "I never forget a bitch's face even when I only saw it on a photo."

-Reneé: "You have a foul mouth. But that's okay, we are gonna talk anyway."

Chris smirked.

-Chris: "Sorry, I'm on leave."

Reneé gave him a confused look.

-Chris: "I only talk with nutcases when I'm at the office."

She kept quiet for a moment, digesting his words. Then:

-Reneé: "When I took Sthandiwe, you left everything in Cape Town and flew to Jo'burg to rescue her. Question is, is she gonna do the same for you?...I hope for your sake she doesn't do what you did in that warehouse. Because if she comes here guns blazing, I'll make sure you catch a bullet before she even gets to you."

Chris was just staring at her, clearly he had no time to waste exchanging words with her.

-Reneé: "Wanna find out how much she loves you, how much you mean to her? Well, let's find out right now."

She said that pulling out a phone from her pocket and dialled Sthandiwe's number, then put the phone on speaker. Sthandiwe answered, knowing very well that it was her calling with a private number.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes."

-Reneé: "You love Chris, right?"

Sthandiwe didn't answer.

-Reneé: "I'll take your silence as a yes. And the offer I made should be relatively easy for you. Hand those papers over to me and I'll give you Chris. I'm gonna send you the coordinates for the exchange. Be there by 17:00 or Chris dies."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't bother sending the coordinates, there won't be any exchange. You aren't getting those papers back."

-Reneé: "Sweetie, if you want Chris, really want him, you'll have to make a sacrifice. You'll have to sacrifice your father's company."

-Sthandiwe: "Do I love Chris? Of course. Enough to sacrifice my father's company for him? Absolutely not."

-Reneé: "I don't believe you."

-Sthandiwe: "Then you don't know me as much as you think you do. Because if you did you'd know that I value my dad's company more than any man I claim to love, a man that might dump me tomorrow. See, love dies, relationships end but my father's company will remain my father's company. So go ahead, do what you gotta do. Kill him if you want to. I don't give a damn. But no one's getting my father's company."

And with that, Sthandiwe hung up. Chris was listening in on the entire conversation. He looked down, visibly hurt. He couldn't believe that Sthandiwe just said that. That she saw him as expendable. It seemed like she didn't care that he was kidnapped because of her. That day at the warehouse, she did go back to save Alizwa but she wasn't coming to save him. Clearly Alizwa meant so much to her than him. After everything he had done for her. Flying all the way from Cape Town to Jo'burg to save her, risking his life in the process. But now she was turning her back on him. Yeah, no good deed goes unpunished. He thought all of that to himself.

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Sthandiwe was finishing eating her cereal when Reneé was calling. After she hung up, she washed the bowl and put it back inside the crockery cabinet. She was so calm, not freaked out by Chris' kidnapping. Then she grabbed her keys and walked to the door. But before she walked out, she stopped by the large portrait of her parents on the wall by the front door. She looked at her father.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, pops. The other day, uncle Vic said I really am my father's daughter. Meaning I'm just like you. So tell me, pops, in a situation like this, what would you do?"

She was looking at him and after a moment she nodded as if he had answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, you're right. Exactly what I thought."

She walked out the door and went to the garage. She opened the car, her bags were still there. She opened the laptop bag and took out that envelope with the share transfer papers. It's been in that bag ever since she got it from Reneé, she never took it out. Then she went back inside the house and went upstairs to the study. She took the signed transfer document out of the envelope and put it in the shredder, shredding it. Then put the share certificate on the shelf and walked out. She got out of the house, locked and went back to the garage. She went to get a tool box from the shelf and took out a screwdriver. Then went to a wooden box at the back of the garage. She opened it, revealing several car number plates. She had found the plates inside the boot of her father's second car two years earlier, when she was cleaning it ready to sell it. She didn't know what he was doing with them but they were used because they already had screw holes. And right at that moment they were going to come in handy. She took out a matching pair then went to KG's car. Screwed off its original plates and replaced them with the fake ones. In just a few minutes she was done.

-Sthandiwe: "I hope no officers stop me."

She put the original plates and the screwdriver in the boot then drove off to work.

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She got to work and her day went on as normal. She went to her classes and when she was done she went back to her office. It was now 12:35 and Chris was 'scheduled' to die at 17:00. She took her phone and called Sihle.

-Sihle: "Hey, chomi."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. I need you to do something for me."

-Sihle: "Don't you always?"

-Sthandiwe: "I need you to send me Ted's work phone number and address."

-Sihle: "Ted? Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "I need to talk to him. I want to know what Reneé is planning. He was Alizwa and Reneé's partner in crime, and I think he's still working for Reneé. So if anyone knows what that bitch is up to, it's him."

-Sihle: "And you think he's just gonna tell you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna give him a choice. I still have those photos of him with his mistress."

-Sihle: "Okay then. I'll SMS you what you need."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks."

She hung up and left her office. She walked to Prof Jansen's office and knocked on his open door.

-Prof Jansen: "Blie. Come on in."

-Sthandiwe: "Prof, can I have the key to our chemical storage room?"

-Prof Jansen: "Chemical storage room? Why? You are not on any active projects, you don't carry out experiments. So what do you need in that storage room?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just Sodium Chloride and Silver Nitrate. The lab assistants need those for my students practical session."

-Prof Jansen: "Oh okay."

He got up and took the keys hanging on his notice board and handed them to her. She walked out and went to the chemical storage room. NaCl and AgNO₃ for her students practical session my foot. She wanted some chloroform for her own personal use. She looked around and found it. She took it together with the NaCl and AgNO₃ she said she needed. Because if she didn't take those it would be noticed that she didn't, and that would raise questions. She got to her office and put the chloroform in a plastic zip lock bag and put it in her handbag. She returned the keys to Prof Jansen then went back to her office and called Letty, one of her course tutors, and asked her to come to her office. Letty was around the department so she got to her office in about 5 minutes.

-Letty: "I'm here, Doc."

-Sthandiwe: "Take these question papers. I'm not gonna be there when you invigilate, I'm leaving soon. But I don't think there'll be any questions, everything in that paper is clear."

-Letty: "You do this a lot lately, Doc. You dont even show up in practical sessions anymore."

-Sthandiwe: "Please stay in your lane, Letty. And take these with you, you'll need them for the first year's practical session tomorrow."

She said that pointing to the NaCl and AgNO₃.

-Letty: "But we have those in the students lab."

-Sthandiwe: "I checked, they aren't enough. Just take them and close the door behind you."

Letty took the papers and the chemical compounds and left. Just as she stepped out, Sihle's SMS came through in Sthandiwe's phone. She read it then went to her shelf, took a dust cloth and put it in her handbag. Then left her office.

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She got to her car and drove to Melville to see uncle Vic. He was working in Helen Joseph Hospital in Westdene but had his private practice in Melville. It was in the afternoon so she knew that he'd be in his surgery. She got there and his assistant was not in the front desk. She passed everyone in the waiting area and went straight to the consultation room. Another lady in the waiting area saw a need to speak up.

-Lady: "Hey, you can't just pass us here and go in. Can't you see that there's a queue? Are you blind?"

Sthandiwe turned and walked straight to her, her facial expression stony.

-Sthandiwe: "Lady, you've picked a wrong day to mess with me. Call me blind again and you'll regret it."

She was speaking with a calm voice but it was scary. The lady kept quiet, now scared. Sthandiwe walked to the consultation room and walked inside without even knocking. Uncle Vic was with a guy patient.

-Uncle Vic: "Thandi, what's this? What are you doing? I'm with a patient here."

-Sthandiwe: "I can see that. But I can't wait, I'm running outta time."

-Uncle Vic: "What are you talking about?"

The guy patient was still sitting there, looking at her. She gave him a hostile and contemptuous look.

-Sthandiwe: "Dude, seriously? Are you still here? Just get out, man. The doctor will attend to you later."

-Uncle Vic: "That's not necessary. Thandi, go wait outside. Let me finish up here first."

-Sthandiwe: "Uncle Vic, does it look like I'm kidding when I say I'm running out of time? This guy needs to go and you'll have to attend to me first. Please."

Uncle Vic told the guy to go wait outside. The guy walked out.

-Uncle Vic: "Start talking. What's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry for doing this, uncle, but I need strong painkillers. But I don't need something that's gonna make me feel drowsy or sleepy."

-Uncle Vic: "Thandi, this is not the way to..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "Uncle Vic, please, help me. I don't have time to wait...Do you remember what you said after my parents died? You said you'd look after me. You said anytime I need something I should come to you. So here I am. I need your help."

-Uncle Vic: "What's going on? What do you have?"

-Sthandiwe: "Bruised ribs and they hurt like hell but I don't have time to entertain that pain today. Not now. There are pills I take but I can't take them now because they make me feel drowsy, and I don't need that today... And I'm also gonna need a rib belt, to reduce the rib movement, thus reducing the pain."

-Uncle Vic: "But you do know that rib belts further limit lung expansion and increase the risk of developing pneumonia, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know all of that but this is only gonna be for a few hours and I know about breathing exercises."

-Uncle Vic: "Okay then I can get you that. As for the painkillers, I do have super strong tablets but I don't recommend them, they are highly addictive. That's why they were discontinued."

-Sthandiwe: "If they do the job just give them to me. I don't care about the addiction part because I'll only use them for today."

-Uncle Vic: "You know that I could lose my license for doing that, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Who's gonna know?"

-Uncle Vic: "But don't you want to tell me what's going on, maybe? You keep saying 'today'. What's happening today? Are you in trouble?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. Besides, you have patients that are still waiting for you outside this door. So we both don't have time to chat."

Uncle Vic walked out to the dispensary and told Sthandiwe to wait for him. But she didn't, she followed him. They got to the dispensary together and he gave her the tablets and the rib belt. In addition to that, Sthandiwe took 5 new syringes and their needles then left in a hurry.

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She passed by Miami Bakehouse and bought a pie and a drink. Then drove to Braamfontein. She got there and parked in the parking lot of the office building where Ted was renting an office space. She wasn't seeing Ted's black Jeep in the lot so she took her phone and called his office number that Sihle had sent her, and made it seem like she was a potential client but she was actually checking if Ted was in. His assistant told her that he was about to go out. She hung up and waited for him to come to his car. Obviously, he was driving another car and she didn't know which one was it in that packed parking lot. But she was going to see him when he goes to it. She took out the rib belt and put it on. And quickly ate the pie then used the drink to down the tablets she got from Uncle Vic. The entire time her eyes were locked on the exit of the building. She saw Ted walking out of the building and she quickly put the drink aside. She took out the chloroform and poured it on that dust cloth. Ted walked to his car, a white Tucson, and she got out of hers. She pulled her head cap down and walked towards him, furtively. When Ted was about to reach for the door handle of his car, she stepped behind him.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello, Ted."

He turned to look at her. She took a step closer to him, her left hand holding the duster behind her. Ted came closer too and grabbed Sthandiwe's right arm.

-Ted: "What else do you want from me, little girl?"

Sthandiwe glanced at his hand then looked up to face him.

-Sthandiwe: "Get your filthy hand off of me."

He didn't. Sthandiwe yanked her arm off of his hand. Ted got his face into hers.

-Ted: "Sweetheart, you can't repeat what you did in that restaurant. Not here."

Sthandiwe's answer to that was a quick movement of her right hand as she grabbed the side of his head, pushed it and hard-smashed his head against his own car. The whole thing happened so fast, he couldn't react. The impact made him dizzy.

-Sthandiwe: "You were saying? Say that again."

Because he was now dizzy, she got the chance to use the duster with chloroform. Unlike in movies, chloroform actually takes some time to take effect. That's why she wanted him dizzy first so he couldn't do much fighting. When he passed out, she quickly went to get her car and brought it closer. She dragged him into the back seat. Then got behind the wheel and drove off. She had to speed and get to Hyde Park before the chloroform wears off.

Insert #47

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She drove off from the parking lot before she could be seen by anyone. And she had taken the briefcase Ted was carrying and put it in her back seat with its unconscious owner. She drove at a breakneck speed and on the way she called KG, he answered quickly.

-KG: "ST. What's up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Gazi lam from the south, when was the last time you were up north in Sandton?"

-KG: "You know that I was there on Monday. In Hyde Park and Sandhurst. But if you're talking about Sandton City, it's been a while since I've been there. Why do you ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "Well, it's time for you to make your second round to Sandton this week. Come to the Hyde Park house now."

-KG: "Why? Is everything okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Don't ask, just take a taxi and come now."

-KG: "Okay, I'll get wheels from Mxo and come now, now."

Mxo is the drummer from the band that KG brought to Sthandiwe's house the other day.

-Sthandiwe: "Sure."

She hung up and stepped on the accelerator some more.

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Meanwhile, things were heating up for Chris. He was now tied to the bed, with only his boxers on. Renéé was standing below the bed, carrying a sharp knife. The chair he was tied to earlier was now close to the bed and there were more instruments on it - another knife, pliers and a hammer. Renéé stepped closer to him and used the knife to make a cut down his thigh. He winced and groaned in pain.

-Renéé: "I don't enjoy doing this, Chris, but I want to be heard. And right now I'm having a hard time getting through to your girlfriend. So you are going to help her listen."

-Chris: "Forget it. I ain't helping you."

-Renéé: "You will, Chris. Because you will suffer. And when you can't stand the pain anymore you will make that phone call for me. I want your girlfriend on the other end of the call to hear the pain and fear in your voice. Maybe then she'll change her mind and consider saving you by agreeing to the exchange."

-Chris: "Like I said, forget it. I ain't making no phone call."

-Renéé: "We'll see about that."

She said that cutting through his flesh again. He groaned again.

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Sthandiwe got to the Hyde Park house and parked in the driveway. She got the house keys out of the glove box, they were still there since the last time she used them. Then she got out of the car and went to get the still-passed-out Ted from the back seat. She dragged him inside the house and went to put him on a chair in the kitchen. She took off his jacket and shirt and left him with only a vest. Then she tied him to the chair using the duct tape from the cupboard drawer. By the time she was finishing tying up his legs, he was already coming to, but he was still woozy. She stepped back from him and that was a right move because he just threw up - effects of the chloroform. After a moment, realising what was going on, he spoke.

-Ted: "What do you want from me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Good, you go straight to the point. I like that. See, Ted, I already know that you helped Renéé kidnap Chris. Now what I wanna know is where she is keeping him."

Of course, she didn't know any of that, it was just a guess. A good guess.

-Sthandiwe: "Tell me what I wanna know and I'll let you live. Play games and you'll die."

He recalled the restaurant incident and he knew that she wasn't bluffing.

-Ted: "I'm sorry, okay? I was only doing a job. Following orders. Reneé and only Reneé is responsible for Chris' kidnapping. She gave the order and I did it because she didn't give me a choice."

-Sthandiwe: "So, you're the one who did it? You took Chris."

-Ted: "She forced me. But I hated what she made me do."

-Sthandiwe: "No, Ted, you didn't. You enjoyed it. Just like I'm gonna enjoy killing you if you don't stop wasting my time."

-Ted: "I swear, she forced me to do it. She also knows about my affair and she's blackmailing me too."

-Sthandiwe: "Only difference is I'm not blackmailing you, I'm telling you that I'm gonna kill you and I'm not bluffing."

-Ted: "Please, understand. I didn't have a choice."

-Sthandiwe: "She's blackmailing you and you want me to feel sorry for you? What does partners in crime blackmailing each other got to do with me? You should never have gotten in bed with her in the first place. You made your bed, Ted, so lie in it."

-Ted: "That's just the problem with Reneé. She makes her bed and one is forced to lie in it. And right now, I'm lying in her bed, a bed she made."

-Sthandiwe: "Ted, I'm gonna ask one more time before I lose my patience. Where is Reneé keeping Chris?"

-Ted: "My family's farm in Kroonstad. Well, it's mine now."

-Sthandiwe: "What? Kroonstad in Free State?"

-Ted: "Yes and it's gonna take at least 2 and a half hours to get there. She didn't want you to find him and free him before she could get what she wants from you. So she told me to take him to my farm. And I had to send the workers home."

-Sthandiwe: "Shit. Shit."

She started pacing. Then stopped and looked at Ted.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna need you to give me directions to the farm."

-Ted: "I'll tell you on our way there."

-Sthandiwe: "Dude, you tried to kill me but ended up putting my friend in hospital. And you kidnapped my boyfriend. What makes you think you are along for the ride?"

He didn't deny that he caused that accident. He only said:

-Ted: "I was only protecting my family, still am. I hate Reneé as much as you do and I want her dead. You and I, Sthandiwe, have a common enemy. So let's work together to take her down. She has to die so I can live in peace."

-Sthandiwe: "Listen here, as far as I'm concerned you're my enemy just as Reneé is. And here's the thing, I don't work with my enemies. And secondly, I'm going out there for Chris. Saving him is my priority, not killing Reneé for you."

-Ted: "Still, you're gonna need more than just his location. You're gonna need me to get to him. That's my farm, I know its layout and I can show you exactly where he's being kept. And I can help you get in, breakdown the perimeter. She has guards there, you know. Lots of eyes, lots of hardware. You won't survive on your own. You need me there."

-Sthandiwe: "How many?"

-Ted: "How many what?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sets of eyes."

-Ted: "Five. She has five guards."

She went to the drawer of the cupboard and came out with an exam pad, a pen and scissors.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna cut off the tape tying your right hand. And I'm gonna need you to draw the layout of the entire farm and the farmhouse. Indicate where each guard is positioned and of course where Chris is being kept. Finish that and I'll let you go. But if you try something stupid, you will regret it."

She used the scissors to cut the tape, freeing his right hand then walked out with the scissors, leaving him to draw.

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She got to her car, took out Ted's phone from his briefcase and took out its battery. Then she took all five syringes and the needles and went back inside the house, hiding the syringes behind her. She found Ted still drawing. So she just went to lean on the table and let him draw. She took out her phone and sent Tim a message telling him that there's someone who was going to come and drop her car at his apartment complex and that she was going to come pick it up later. Tim was the CEO of her father's company and he was like a son to her father. She sent the message but Ted was still drawing. After some time he stopped.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you done?"

-Ted: "Yeah."

She left the scissors and the syringes on the table and went to look at Ted's drawings.

-Sthandiwe: (satisfied) "Good. For your sake, I hope this is correct."

-Ted: "It is."

-Sthandiwe: "Now take me through it."

He did. He told her everything, including the directions.

-Ted: "Now that you've gotten what you wanted, can I go home?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

-Ted: "Make sure you kill that bitch René."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll try. But first things first."

She went to the table, took one of the syringes and played with it.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure you've seen this in a movie before. A person injecting another with air into the vein, killing them."

-Ted: "Are you gonna kill me with that syringe?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. Thing is, what you see in those movies is pure fiction. If I could inject you with air in this syringe right now you wouldn't die. Yeah, small bubbles can block capillaries in vital organs, most urgently the brain. Worst case scenario, neurological damage and paralysis. But really, it's not fatal."

-Ted: "So you wanna paralyse me?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'm not that cruel, Ted. I'm gonna inject you with all those empty syringes in that table. Five 20 millilitre syringes, that's 100 millilitres of air. And that coupled with your heart defect, you will die. You see, under ordinary circumstances your heart's contracting chambers squeeze the blood out and force it through the circulatory system. But if a massive embolus or bubble shows up and your heart starts squeezing on that, well there's nothing to get any purchase on, the air will just compress. Blood flow will stop and eventually so will your heart. And with your heart defect, no one will ask questions about your death, they'll just think you suffered a heart attack."

Ted looked at her with a question mark.

-Sthandiwe: "You're wondering how I know about your heart? Well, I'm sure you know by now that in the past few weeks I asked my friend, Sihle, to look into you. From the file she gave me, I got to know that you were born a preemie, and that you've had a bad heart since birth, pun intended."

-Ted: "So you are going to kill me? Even though you said you would let me go?"

-Sthandiwe: "You should have listened to me, Ted. I told you that I don't want our paths to cross again but no, you just couldn't stay out of my life. You didn't listen. And now you're gonna pay. You're gonna pay for putting Palesa in hospital and for kidnapping Chris."

She tied his right hand again and got another piece of duct tape and covered his mouth. Then she rushed to the bathroom and got a blood pressure cuff out of the medicine cabinet. She returned downstairs and found Ted trying to free himself, but of course he was just wasting his time. She got to him and put the BP cuff on his arm. She pumped until the pressure was just above the diastolic pressure point, then released the pressure and removed the pump. She did all of that so that veins in the crook of

Ted's arm could be visible, and her mission got accomplished, she could see the vein. She attached the needles in all the syringes, drew air in and injected all that 100 millilitres of air into Ted's vein. He tried to fight it, but there wasn't much he could do tied up. And in less than 10 minutes he had rested.

-Sthandiwe: "I'll deal with your body later."

She left him there and went upstairs.

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She got to the main bedroom and removed a mat in front of the bed, revealing a big safe on the floor. She opened it and took out two rifles, the venerable AK-47s, two hand guns and a lot of ammo.

-Sthandiwe: "Now these are not registered. I'm good to go."

She went downstairs, and when she was passing Ted's dead body she stopped and looked at it.

-Sthandiwe: "You should have listened."

She teared the papers with the drawings off the exam pad and put them in her pocket then walked out the door to her car. She opened the boot, put the guns inside and took out the car's original plates and the screwdriver. She unscrewed the fake plates and took them off. Then fixed the original plates back on. She couldn't drive for a long distance, to another city, with fake plates. She didn't want trouble. Besides, the plates had already served their purpose. She got inside the car and sat behind the wheel, waiting for KG who was still a no show. The time was now 15:30. She took a deep breath. Then touched the lion pendant hanging on a chain around her neck. She had kept the promise she made to Chris the other day, ever since he put it on her she never took it off.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm coming to get you, baby. Please hang in there."

Her phone beeped, Tim's SMS reply coming through, saying it's okay her friend could bring the car. She smiled. Then her phone rang. This time it was KG telling her that he was at the gate and he'd been hitting the intercom. She walked inside the house and opened the gate for him.

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KG arrived in Mxo's Sprinter and parked outside. He got out and met Sthandiwe by the front door.

-KG: "Hey. What's up?"

Without saying a word she invited him inside and led him to the kitchen and showed him Ted's body.

-KG: "Is he...?"

-Sthandiwe: "Dead? Very."

-KG: "What happened?"

She told him everything and about Chris.

-KG: "Why didn't you call me sooner?"

-Sthandiwe: "If I did, this kitchen floor would be bloody by now. And I'd be in trouble with the cops again. You have a hot head, KG. Your methods are messy. This one's contained."

-KG: "Maybe you have a point. But in that farm I won't follow your lead."

-Sthandiwe: "I won't expect you to. We don't know what's gonna happen out there, we're gonna have to adapt, improvise and think on our feet."

-KG: "Then let's go."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. We'll deal with this guy later."

-KG: "So what's the plan?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll bring you up to speed on the way."

-KG: "And the weapons?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sorted."

They walked out. Sthandiwe locked and they got to the Corolla and drove off, leaving the Sprinter there. But she first drove back to campus to see Xolisa. She found him still at his office and she gave him Ted's car keys and asked him to go get Ted's car from his workplace after hours and drive it to Tim's apartment complex. She told him to be discreet about it. And she gave him both Tim's and Ted's addresses. Xolisa didn't ask a lot of questions, he just promised that he'd do it. Then Sthandiwe and KG left for Kroonstad.

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It was 18:30 when they got to Kroonstad. They parked a fair distance away from the farm. They got the weapons and the extra ammo out of the boot and walked the rest of the way to the farm.

Insert #48

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They hadn't walked far when KG asked.

-KG: "Hey, did you do a clean sweep in the boot of my car?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. Why?"

-KG: "I have binos in there. And we're gonna need them. So let's go back."

-Sthandiwe: "I never saw them though."

-KG: "Trust me, they are there."

They went back to the car. She opened the boot and KG lifted the mat at the corner and came back with the binoculars.

-KG: "Told ya."

-Sthandiwe: "It's your car after all so you'd know."

KG noticed the plates, which he didn't see earlier because Sthandiwe was the one who took out the guns.

-KG: "And the plates?"

-Sthandiwe: "They are just fake plates I used when I was carrying out my Ted mission. Then I took them off when I was done."

-KG: "Where did you get them?"

-Sthandiwe: "BB's stuff. And please don't ask 'cause I also don't have answers."

-KG: "I won't. Trust me, over the years I learned not to ask too many questions. That keeps me safe."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, tell me about it... No, actually dont."

-KG: "Maybe we can still use the plates. Guns are gonna be fired in that farm. We are carrying loud rifles here. So what if someone from the neighbouring farms hears and sees our getaway car then run their mouth when giving their statement to the cops? Let's put the plates on just to be on the safe side and we'll take them off before we get to the city."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. It's better to be safe than sorry, right?"

She took the fake plates and the screwdriver out. She started unscrewing off the rear original plate.

-KG: "So you really don't trust me, huh?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I trust you. What are you talking about?"

-KG: "Then you have a funny way of showing it."

-Sthandiwe: (busy with the plate) "You know, my dad taught me, actually he planted it in my head, that in life the only person I could depend on is myself. But he also told me that there's a difference between depending on someone and trusting them. He said, in life there comes a time when one must trust others, and that's not a bad thing as long as one chooses carefully who to trust."

She stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

-Sthandiwe: "What I'm trying to say is, gazi, you are one of the few people I trust in this life. And that's the honest truth."

-KG: "Then why didn't you call me on your Ted mission, as you call it?"

-Sthandiwe: (back to installing the plate) "After what you did to Kate, do you really blame me? I planned everything then called you when I did because I knew that by the time you get to Hyde Park I'd already be done with Ted. Clean job. Not your mess."

-KG: "So you think I have a hot head?"

She was done changing the rear plate. She got up and looked at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Actually, I'm starting to think you are a sociopath."

-KG: "What?"

She was already moving to change the front plate. KG followed her. She put the plate and the screwdriver on the bonnet and looked at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Monday, the day you erased Kate, I got to your place and found you so chilled, watching TV, as if nothing had happened. The next day I found you playing soccer with your brother in the driveway, all happy with no care in the world. Who does that after they've killed someone? I think only sociopaths do."

-KG: "Hey, I'm not a sociopath. I thought you knew the kind of person I am. I seldom show when I'm hurt, vulnerable or feeling guilty. I'm a cheerful person, care-free. Well, at least that's what y'all think. But it's just a mask. I'm a human being too and I feel hurt, guilty and down sometimes. Just because I don't show it, it doesn't mean I don't."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay."

She took the screwdriver and screwed off the front plate.

-KG: "And please don't act all holy with me. You and I are the same. We both killed people. I killed Kate and you just killed Ted. Only difference is I don't show the feeling of guilt. But that doesn't mean I like killing. No sane person enjoys taking another person's life. And the last I checked, I was 100% sane. But you can go ahead, go around with guilt written all over your face for everyone to see and see if Ted and the two guys you shot in that warehouse are gonna come back to life."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, point made. And you're right, I'm no saint. It's just that, I never had brothers and sisters, my friends are my siblings. And when someone hurts them, the people I love, I react in a horrible way. I don't like the person I become."

-KG: "Let it go. Try not to beat yourself about it."

She finished attaching the front fake plate. She went to put the original plates and the screwdriver in the boot. Then got behind the wheel and drove the car into the bushes, hiding it. She got out and they resumed their walk to the farm, hanging their rifles over their shoulders with their slings.

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On the way.

-KG: "So how did you do it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Do what?"

-KG: "How did you kill Ted?"

-Sthandiwe: "I just used a few things I learned from my doctor mother when she was still alive."

-KG: "It's a good thing you paid attention then."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess. Can you believe that Ted actually wanted to come here with me? Saying Reneé is our mutual enemy and we should join forces to kill her."

-KG: "That's funny considering he was working with her."

-Sthandiwe: "He said he wasn't working with her but for her, and by force. Apparently, she was blackmailing him. Ugh! As if I believed him."

-KG: "He was probably wanting to come along just to screw you over when here."

-Sthandiwe: "My thoughts exactly."

-KG: "Anyway, do you think Chris is still alive? Do you think Reneé would really kill him? I mean the time she gave you for the exchange has passed already."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris is alive. She wouldn't kill him. But then again, I don't know how a sociopath's mind works. But you should know. I mean you are one."

She said that jokingly.

-KG: "Lil sis, I really love you but call me a sociopath again and you'll be the first person I drop with this gun."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, I'm joking. We're are probably going to die in that farm so we might as well enjoy our last moments on this earth. Just laugh a little."

KG just chuckled and looked at her.

-KG: "It's okay to say it, you know."

-Sthandiwe: "Say what?"

-KG: "It's okay to admit that you were wrong. You said Reneé was still dealing with her mother's death and that she was in no position to cause trouble. So what's this? Isn't it trouble?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I was wrong and you were right. Happy now?"

-KG: "Maybe. I just can't wait to put a bullet in that crazy Reneé."

-Sthandiwe: "You are trigger happy aren't you?"

-KG: "The other day I told you that I don't hit women. But hey if they are crazy and step on my toe, I also react badly, just like you. And Reneé is pissing me off. Forget my daughter for a sec, she's hurting you, my little sister. And I don't take kindly to that."

She smiled, feeling the love he had for her. At that moment, her phone rang.

-KG: "You need to turn that off or put it on flight mode. We can't afford any distractions."

She checked the caller ID.

-Sthandiwe: "I gotta take this. It's Tim."

-KG: "And who the hell is Tim?"

-Sthandiwe: (joking) "My boyfriend."

-KG: "Keep attracting them and when they turn psycho on you, you'll come running to me wanting my help. Just like I'm helping you now."

Sthandiwe just smiled and answered the phone. Tim was telling her that her friend had arrived with the car but asking why it was a Tucson when he knows that she owns a BMW. She only told him that it was a long story but he should keep the car and she also assured him that it wasn't stolen. Then she hung up and turned the phone off. They kept walking, and jumped over the fence, entering the farm. They walked through a maize (corn) field, guided by Ted's drawings. The harvest season had long passed but the dry maize stalks were still there and they were so fucking irritating to the skin. They finally made it through and they entered the potato field and they were now seeing the farmhouse at a distance, but not very far. And they walked towards it.

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As they came closer to the gate that separated the potato field and the farmhouse they had to go down and walk on their fours (knees and hands) between the potato rows. Because according to Ted there were two guards stationed at that gate, and they didn't want to be spotted by them. But they got tired quickly and sat down. They were going to have to walk past the potato field and past two rows of trees that served as a boundary between the field and the side of the farmhouse.

-Sthandiwe: "Can you give me the binos?"

He gave them to her. She looked in the direction of the farmhouse. It was already getting dark but the lights at the gate and at the farmhouse were already lit so they could see clearly.

-KG: "So according to the drawings of that punk Ted, there are two guards at that gate."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. And in order to get to the farmhouse we gonna have to go through them, there's no other way. Ted said so and he was right that's a damn high fence they have beyond those trees and it's topped with an electric fence."

-KG: "Give me the bins."

She did and he looked.

-KG: "The guys are not standing together directly at the gate. One is standing at our 2 o'clock and the other at 10 o'clock. But their eyes are trained to the gate."

-Sthandiwe: "I've noticed."

-KG: "Do you really think we can take down five guards and Reneé, just the two of us? Is it possible?"

-Sthandiwe: "What I know is 'impossible' is the word found only in the dictionary of fools."

-KG: "This is a risky situation to be philosophical and quoting Napoleon Bonaparte, don't you think?"

-Sthandiwe: "The only thing you should be thinking about right now is how we are going to take out those guys without alerting the ones guarding the house."

-KG: "Okay, go north east and I'll go north west. I'll take out the guard standing on the left hand side of the gate, you take the one on the right."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, we are going to stick together, no splitting up."

-KG: "We are gonna have to split up if we want to survive."

-Sthandiwe: "Divide and conquer, huh."

-KG: "Exactly. And we're gonna have to try not to use the guns to take those motherfuckers out...Where did you get these pieces anyway and who taught you how to use them?"

-Sthandiwe: "Courtesy of BB. He taught me everything I know about weapons and kicking ass."

-KG: "And when he gave you that training, he gave you the ability not only to protect yourself but also the ones you love. So let's go get your man."

He said that already getting on his hands and knees again ready to crawl forward. But Sthandiwe grabbed his arm.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, before we go... I don't know what's gonna happen out there, KG. But if I don't make it out alive please know that I love and appreciate you. You are the brother I never had. You always had my back since our varsity days and you still have my back now. I really love you, buddy. And please make sure you get Chris out of there."

KG just chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't do that. I mean what I just said."

-KG: "We are getting all corny now, aren't we? But hey, I love you too, gazi. And I'll see you on the other side of that fence. You are not dying today."

Sthandiwe took a deep breath.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, let's do this."

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Inside, Chris was still tied to the steel bed. Alive but weak, due to losing blood. Reneé had now dressed the cuts she had made in his thigh and stomach, only because she didn't want him to lose too much blood and pass out before he could make that phone call. She had also used the pliers to take out one of his maxillary central incisors. And the hammer to crush his left hand. He was in serious pain.

-Reneé: "You still don't want to make this call?"

-Chris: "Bitch, please, you've been at it all day. Just skip to the part where you kill me because I ain't making no phone call for you."

-Reneé: "I can't believe that you are this dumb. You don't want to make the phone call because you don't want Sthandiwe to lose what's hers. Are you stupid? The bitch doesn't want you. You heard it yourself. So why protect her? Her losing her father's company should be revenge enough for you."

Chris chuckled, miserable.

-Chris: "Yeah, I don't have much love for Thandi right now but let's just say I hate you more than I hate her. So I'll never do anything that favours you. Deal with it."

He said that already getting weaker, his eyes were slowly closing. Reneé looked at him for a long beat.

-Reneé: "Then you're gonna die."

His eyes completely shut. He passed out. Reneé slapped him so he could wake up but he didn't. Reneé made for the door and walked out, leaving him alone. She talked to the guy that was standing guard at the door.

-Reneé: "This is not working. The stupid fuck has just passed out on me. Go untie him and take him to my car, we are evacuating. When you're done you'll find me at the back. I'm going for a smoke."

-The Guard: "But why are we evacuating?"

-Reneé: "Call it sixth sense or whatever but I don't feel right about sticking around here. Ted has not been answering his phone for hours now. Maybe that bitch got to him. And the guy's a pussy, one shove he'd run his mouth. So let's get going. I don't wanna take that chance."

-The Guard: "Okay, then."

Reneé walked away.

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The guy walked into the bedroom where Chris was. He knew that he had passed out so he was comfortable with putting his gun on his waist. Then he took out a knife and cut off the cable ties that were used to tie Chris to the bed. He started with the ones tying his feet then moved to his right hand - wrong move. When he was bending over ready to cut off the cable tying the left hand, Chris opened his eyes because he hadn't passed out to begin with, he just closed his eyes because he wanted Reneé to give him a break and leave him alone, not knowing that an opportunity like this would present itself. But now that it had, he was going to use it. The will to survive took over. He quickly grabbed the knife that was on the chair next to the bed and didn't hesitate to cut the guy on the side of his neck, severing his carotid artery. The guy screamed in pain as he put his hand over the cut trying to stop the blood that was gushing out. Chris knew that the screams would draw attention and he quickly cut the cable tie on his left hand, climbed down the bed and went to get the guy's gun from his waist. The guy had now dropped to the floor, bleeding out. Chris rushed to the door with the gun, no longer having time to entertain the pain he was feeling, all he was thinking about was survival, getting out of there alive. He didn't know how he was going to take out all the guards alone and injured but he just had to try. Reneé had heard the scream from where she was, in the back porch, and came running back inside the house to check what was going on. But immediately when she saw Chris coming out of the room carrying the gun, she turned back running because she had no gun with her, she couldn't shoot. Chris saw her down the corridor and didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. But Reneé ducked and quickly opened one of the doors that were lining the corridor. Chris' first bullet hit the wall, the second one reached her as she was getting inside the door but only grazed her forearm. By the time the third one came she had already gotten inside and it hit the door. The two guards that were stationed outside, at the front of the house, heard the gunshots and came in running. They spotted Chris coming down the corridor towards them and they started shooting. The farmhouse was one of those old houses with narrow passages and many doors opening to the passage. So Chris shot back as he opened the closest door lining the passage and got inside. The guards stopped shooting and rushed to the room he had entered into.

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Sthandiwe and KG were still on different sides of the field but they were about to emerge from the field into the row of trees. They both heard the gunshots in the house, and they both knew that something wrong was happening and they had to get in there fast. So taking out the guards at the gate silently was no longer an option. Without communicating they both quickly stood up at the same time and looked at each other. KG used his hand to signal to her that it was now time for them to take out the gate guards, who were now also looking at the house disturbed by the gunshots, not paying attention to the shooters behind them. KG and Sthandiwe both used their rifles, aimed and fired, taking both guards down. Then they slung the rifles over their shoulders and ran to the gate. They got in. But as they were running to

the house, KG saw Reneé running to the cars that were there. The bitch heard the gunshots from the gate and knew that Chris' people had arrived to get him and she was now fleeing the scene, saving her own ass not giving a damn if the guards she had hired were being killed or what. KG just couldn't miss the opportunity to kill the bitch.

-KG: "ST, go inside the house and get Chris. I'll go after Reneé."

-Sthandiwe: "KG, we came here for Chris. He's the priority."

-KG: "ST, just go."

She knew that he was determined to get to Reneé so she let him be and she ran to the house. KG dropped his rifle because it was disturbing him, he couldn't run fast enough with it on his shoulder, and he ran towards Reneé. Reneé got into a Hyundai i20 that was parked next to her Land Rover. She couldn't use her car because the keys were inside the house where the shootouts were happening and being the coward that she was, she wasn't going to go inside there. The i20 had its key in the ignition so she started it and took off to the opposite direction, there was another gate where she was driving to. But KG was already closer. He took out his .22 handgun and fired shots, aiming at the wheels. The car was moving so hitting his target wasn't that easy, but the forth bullet hit the tyre. Didn't pierce it, however. But the fifth and the sixth did their job. Reneé's car wobbled and became hard to steer. She decided to stop it before it could wreck, and got out. KG was now running towards her. She got out and ran to a nearby shed. KG fired several shots but none of them hit Reneé before she could enter the shed. KG stopped shooting and also ran to that shed.

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Inside the house, Chris had ran into that room that seemed to be a laundry of some sort, but he didn't stick around there because he knew that the two guards were on his tale. He found another door that led to an even more narrow corridor. He got out that door and ran down the narrow corridor to his left and got into a third room down, before those guards could see him. The room he got into seemed to be a pantry. So he got inside one of the large built-in cabinets, sat in a foetal position and awaited his fate, but with his gun trained to the cabinet door. He told himself that he was going to go down with at least one more of them. When the two guards came out of that laundry and into the even more narrow corridor, there was no sign of Chris and they didn't know which way he went. So they decided to split up, one went left and the other went right. And they went in every room, checking. The one that went left got to the third room, the pantry, and got inside. He walked around looking, then opened the cabinets one by one. Chris was hearing him and held his breath inside that cabinet, praying that he stops opening the cabinets before he gets to the one he was in. But those prayers didn't reach God because the guard opened the cabinet he was in. But hey he wasn't the wiser because Chris pulled the trigger before he pulled his, hitting him in the face. He went down. The guard that went to the right of the corridor heard the gunshot and came out of the room he was searching in and went to the side where he had heard the shot coming from. Sthandiwe had also gotten inside the house. But it was a big, creepy, old farmhouse so she didn't know where Chris was, she was still looking, walking furtively with her rifle slinged over her back and her handgun drawn. But when she also heard the shot, she rushed to

the side of the source. When she turned a corner, her eyes met the eyes of that lone guard. She pointed her gun, and so did the guard, but none of them took the shot, it was a Mexican standoff.

-Sthandiwe: "Sipho?"

-Sipho: "Sthandiwe. Not a pleasure to see you."

Oh, so they know each other.

-Sthandiwe: "Man, I don't want to shoot you but I will if you force me. I suggest you drop your weapon and walk away with your life."

-Sipho: "You were always full of yourself and nothing has changed I see."

Chris came out of the pantry to the corridor Sthandiwe and Sipho were standing in. They were on opposite sides, the pantry door was in the middle, meaning Chris was now standing between them, with their guns drawn. Chris was now carrying two guns, the one he had and the other he had just taken from the guard he had just shot, but nothing said "shoot" in his head, the standoff just distracted him.

-Sthandiwe: (quickly) "Chris, go back inside."

-Chris: "What's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: (firmly) "Now, Chris!"

Chris looked at the guard (Sipho) then at Sthandiwe and winked. He got down quickly and as soon as he did, Sthandiwe pulled the trigger. She hit Sipho in the chest and he went down but not before his finger pulled the trigger. The first bullet hit Sthandiwe in the arm and she dived down as the following bullets from Sipho's automatic firearm just went into air and ended only God knows where, before Sipho left this plane of existence.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, are you okay?"

-Chris: "Yeah. Are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I will be."

They both got up. Sthandiwe went to Sipho and looked at him.

-Sthandiwe: "You were always stupid and nothing has changed I see. I told you to drop the weapon and go."

-Chris: "You knew him?"

-Sthandiwe: "Long story... Are we on the clear? We took down 2 at the gate. How many were they?"

-Chris: "Five, I think. And if that's the case then they are all gone except for Renéé."

-Sthandiwe: "If there were more, they would have been here already. KG is dealing with Renéé outside. Let's go."

Insert #49

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Chris and Sthandiwe were now walking down the corridor.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry this had to happen to you, Chris."

She said that putting her other hand on the bullet wound in her arm. She grimaced in pain.

-Chris: "You're hurt."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll be fine. The bullet just grazed my arm."

-Chris: "I didn't think you'd come for me after I heard what you said to Reneé on the phone earlier."

-Sthandiwe: "We'll talk about that later. We need to get outta here first."

-Chris: "I need to get my clothes. Follow me."

He was still in his boxers. They walked to the bedroom he was held in. Sthandiwe saw the guy with the slit neck, he had bled out and died on the floor. She looked at Chris.

-Sthandiwe: "Did you...?"

-Chris: "Do that? Yeah, I had to."

He answered as he picked up his clothes on the floor, in the corner. Sthandiwe was shocked to see what he was capable of. She stood there until she snapped out of it when she saw that Chris was struggling to put his clothes on because of his painful left hand. She quickly helped him put on his jeans, no time to button them up. He put his sneakers on and Sthandiwe tied the laces. She had to, in case they had to run out of there. Chris used his T-shirt to wipe his fingerprints off the knife and the guns he had used then left them there. Then he put on the T-shirt as they were walking out of the room.

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In the shed. Reneé had ran inside and went to hide behind the many rows of stacked lucerne bales that were there. When KG walked in, he couldn't see her. It was already dark outside, but the pole lights around the yard were lit so at least it was light outside but inside that big, windowless shed it was dark as hell. KG walked in but stood by the door. Going deeper in that darkness could be suicide, Reneé could see him first and attack, and she knew the layout of the shed better than him. But there was no way he was going to leave there without dealing with her first. He took out his phone and used its flashlight. Slowly, he proceeded forward, his eyes darting around, looking for her. With his phone on one hand and the gun on the other. But before he could get farther inside, before reaching the rows of bales, he noticed a pull switch hanging from the ceiling. He pulled the cord and a row of fluorescent tubes attached to the ceiling lit up. Good, now he could see and he didn't need his phone flashlight anymore,

so he turned it off and put the phone back in his pocket. But there were rows and rows of lucerne bales in there, and Reneé could be hiding behind any of them. So he really had to do some serious searching. He walked slowly with his gun drawn, looking behind each row. Reneé was standing behind the last row holding her breath, with no weapon at hand. When she heard KG finally coming closer to where she was, she knew that she had to run or else she was going to die. She ran but tripped over a fork spade that was on the ground and she made that "ahhh" sound as she fell. KG heard that and he ran to where the sound was coming from, but Reneé had already gotten up and continued running. KG saw her as she was about to turn around the corner of the bale row, running. He fired a shot but it didn't hit her, she was already getting out of sight. He ran after her, and saw her running to the door. He fired and one of his bullets hit her shoulder but she just yelped and continued running out of the shed. KG's following shots just hit the corrugated iron shed wall, Reneé was gone.

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Sthandiwe and Chris were running out the back door of the house when they heard KG's shots. Sthandiwe saw Reneé running towards a cluster of trees near the shed. She was now at the back of the house, far from Reneé. So for better chances of hitting her, she had to ignore the pain in her arm and use her rifle, as the maximum firing range of the AK-47 is 350m, and she was way closer than that but far for her handgun. She fired three shots but Reneé was running and it was night, only the pole lights illuminated the area, so hitting her was a challenge. KG was standing by the shed also firing with his handgun. By the time Sthandiwe fired the fourth shot, Reneé was already out of sight. Chris was standing by the corner of the house, with no gun, just watching. He turned around and saw car headlights coming towards the farm but they were still far. KG was starting to run to the trees, where Reneé had disappeared into, refusing to let her escape.

-Chris: "Thandi, we've got company. There's a car approaching."

-Sthandiwe: (shouting for KG) "Yoh, buddy. Let her go. We got what we came for. Let's go."

-Chris: (also shouting) "We've got company. We gotta go."

KG stopped and threw his hands up in the air, angry and defeated. Then he turned around running to where Chris and Sthandiwe were. And when he got to them:

-KG: (angry) "Why the fuck did you call me back?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, excuse me, didn't we tell you that we've got company? There's a car coming."

-KG: "You should have let me finish her first."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, WE are the blacks here, not Reneé, and we are carrying guns. So what do you think that white farmer coming in that car is gonna do once he gets here? Wise up, man. We gotta get outta here. We came here for Chris and we've got him. Now let's go."

-KG: "Fine. Let's go."

-Sthandiwe: "Question is, how are we going to get out? We can't use the same way we came in. Chris here is injured, he can't jump no fence. And our car is far."

-KG: "Let's use Reneé's Rover over there. And use that gate down there and not the one that coming car is going to use."

He was referring to the gate Reneé was driving to when she was escaping in that i20.

-Sthandiwe: "But we don't know where the Rover's keys are."

-KG: "Who needs keys? Hey, I'm from the township, I can get into that car and start it without a key."

-Chris: "But there's no time to do all of that, KG. That coming car is approaching fast... I think the Rover's keys are on that guy I killed in the bedroom."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh?"

-Chris: "Yeah, I heard Reneé telling him to untie me and go put me in her car. So maybe the keys are on him."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll go get them. I'll be faster than you, Chris."

She said that already giving her rifle to KG and ran back to the house. KG ran to pick up the rifle he had dropped earlier and Chris went to wait by the Land Rover. Soon Sthandiwe came running with the keys, indeed they were in that guard's pocket. KG also came back in a hurry and Sthandiwe gave him the keys, he was going to have to drive because he was the only one not injured. He put the rifles in the back seat and quickly got behind the wheel. Chris and Sthandiwe got in the back seat fast and KG drove out of there.

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When that other car got to the farmhouse they were already gone. After some time driving down the road they had taken they had to find a turn and drive to where their car was parked and dump the Rover. They looked until they finally found a path less travelled and it led them to the side where their car was. When they saw their car, they dumped the Rover, wiped their fingerprints off, just in case, took their rifles out and left. They walked through tall grass and got to their car. Chris and Sthandiwe got in the back seat and KG drove off.

-Sthandiwe: (looking at Chris) "Baby, I'm really sorry for what happened. All the pain you went through."

-Chris: "I really didn't think you were coming."

-Sthandiwe: "I wasn't gonna let you die here, babe. I love you too much to do that. I never let people I care about get hurt and do nothing about it."

-KG: "And good thing is she's tough enough to handle the heat. Some people would have bailed and let you deal with this alone."

-Chris: "That's what I thought she did. (looking at Sthandiwe) I thought you made a choice. I thought you chose your father's company over me then headed for the hills."

-Sthandiwe: "Never. I never leave the people I love to fend for themselves when it gets too tough. And I know that you ended up here because of me, so I wasn't gonna let that woman continue hurting you... I've never ran from a fight in my life. I said what I said on that phone because I was thinking of you, of your safety. It was the only way to get Reneé to drop her guard."

-Chris: "I understand now. So, thank you for coming to get me."

-Sthandiwe: "You don't have to thank me, babe, really."

Chris just leaned in and pecked her lips.

-KG: (looking at the rearview mirror) "Eew! Guys, please don't kiss, I'm right here."

They laughed.

-Chris: "And thanks to you too, KG, for being here. Thanks for coming to save me."

-KG: "Hey, I wasn't gonna let my future brother-in-law die in a stupid farm in the middle of nowhere."

-Sthandiwe: "Future brother-in-law? Who's getting married now?"

-KG: (smiling) "You'd be surprised... Anyway, how are you doing, bro? I can see that bitch roughed you up hey."

-Chris: "I'll be fine. You know what they say: whatever doesn't kill you only makes you stronger."

-KG: "I always thought whoever came up with that was probably high."

-Chris: "Yeah, no kidding."

They all laughed. And before they got to town, they stopped and KG changed the plates. Then they proceeded forward in their journey.

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They got to Hyde Park just before 23:00. They got inside the house and Chris saw Ted's body. Sthandiwe told him everything that happened. Then she cut the tape that Ted was tied with and got a damp cloth to clean him up as he had threw up earlier. Then KG dressed him up in his clothes. And they took him to the Corolla. Sthandiwe called Tim and told him that she was coming to get the car. He protested saying he was already in bed but he ended up saying she could come. She hung up and told KG that he was going to have to drive them to Morningside, to Tim's place. They all got inside the Corolla and KG drove. They got to Morningside and Sthandiwe went to get Ted's car from Tim. Then they drove off again, KG driving behind Sthandiwe. When they got out of Morningside, she pulled over on the side of the road, and so did KG, behind her. Sthandiwe asked him to help her carry Ted's body and put it behind the wheel of his car. They did. Then Sthandiwe took out Ted's phone from his briefcase and put its battery

back on, but didn't turn it on, then put it back in the briefcase. Then they got into the Corolla and left Ted's car there.

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They got to Auckland Park and parked in the driveway. Then they got out and went inside the house. Sthandiwe told KG to go take a shower in the guest bathroom. Then she and Chris went to take their shower in the master bathroom. It had been a long day and they all needed to clean up and rest. After the shower, Sthandiwe cleaned up her arm wound with an antiseptic then dressed it. After that, she helped Chris clean his and dress them. Then she went to check up on KG in the spare room he was going to sleep in. She took out fresh linen from the wardrobe and gave it to him to change the linen that was on the bed. She thanked him for coming with her and for everything. Then they shared a hug and she left him to do his thing. She returned to her bedroom and found Chris sitting on the bed. She passed and went to the en-suite bathroom. She got water and painkillers then came back to the bedroom. They both took the pills and got to bed.

-Chris: (looking at her) "I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "And I love you more."

-Chris: "And now we're even. I saved your life and today you've saved mine."

He kissed her, and they cuddled until they fell asleep.

Dangerous Love

Insert #50

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In the morning, Sthandiwe opened her eyes and looked at Chris. He was sleeping so peacefully, and he deserved his beauty sleep, he deserved the rest after everything he had gone through. So Sthandiwe got out of bed slowly, careful not to wake him. She went to the bathroom and turned on the water in the shower. Then she stripped off her PJs. But before she got inside the shower, she felt the urge to throw up. She ran to the toilet and did her thing then rinsed her mouth. The throwing up hurt her ribs even more.

-Sthandiwe: "Tsk! Uncle Vic's pills are just as fucked up as the ones I was taking."

She didn't ask herself why she threw up at work in the morning of the day before, and she hadn't taken any pills then, it was before she went to see uncle Vic. She just thought it was pills then got in the shower. After taking the shower she returned to the bedroom and Chris was still sleeping. She lotioned herself and bandaged the wound in her arm. Then she put on blue boyfriend ripped jeans, a crispy white shirt, that she tucked in the front, and silver stiletto heels. At least no more sneakers. Evidently her mood was changing, and she was slowly going back to taking care of herself. Then she went back to the bathroom and took her anti-inflammatory pills. After that she walked out of the bedroom.

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She went to KG's bedroom and knocked.

-KG: "Come in."

She went inside and found him still under covers but awake.

-Sthandiwe: "Morning."

-KG: "Morning, sis."

She went to sit on the bed next to him.

-Sthandiwe: "Can we talk?"

-KG: "About?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know I said some nasty shit to you in that farm yesterday. And I want to apologise. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said what I said."

-KG: "But we talked about this yesterday. Why bring it up again?"

-Sthandiwe: "We talked about it but I didn't apologise. That's why I'm apologising now."

-KG: "Don't worry about it. It's water under the bridge... But I must say, I asked myself why you questioned that I didn't look guilty about killing Kate but didn't question the fact that I didn't look grief-stricken over my daughter's death. My daughter died the day before I killed Kate. But still I watched TV and played the damn soccer with my lil brother. You didn't ask how I did that. You didn't ask how I didn't let grief consume me. But you were quick to ask why I didn't let guilt consume me. You were quick to call me a sociopath."

-Sthandiwe: "Human nature. We tend to spot only the wrong...But I'm really sorry."

-KG: "Well, it's like I said yesterday, I seldom show emotions. But that doesn't mean I don't feel. I'm human too and I can feel."

-Sthandiwe: "Do you feel the kind of guilt that I do? KG, I didn't sleep a wink last night. I was tossing and turning thinking about all the people I have killed, especially Siphoh. I kept seeing his face."

-KG: "Sipho?"

-Sthandiwe: "One of the guards at the farm. I knew him from my varsity days. I didn't want to shoot him but..."

-KG: (finishing her sentence) "...but you had to. If you didn't, he was going to shoot YOU....It's gonna be alright, ST. It's gonna take a while but you will learn to live with it."

-Sthandiwe: "What if I don't wanna live with it?"

KG sat up straight on the bed.

-KG: "What do you want me to say, ST?"

A tear trickled down Sthandiwe's cheek.

-Sthandiwe: "I want you to tell me that you are struggling with this too. I want you to tell me that you also didn't sleep last night. I want you to tell me that guilt is..."

-KG: (interrupting) "Stop, ST, stop. Don't do that... Look, I don't like what happened to all those guards any more than you do. But we all did what we had to do. So, you better figure out a way to live with it because there's no undoing what happened."

-Sthandiwe: "But how, KG? How do I figure out a way to live with it? By pretending it never happened? Is that easy for you?"

-KG: "What happened to all those guards in that warehouse and in that farm, even to Ted, is a tragedy. But I'm not gonna sit here and tell you that what you, me, Chris and Alizwa did is wrong because it's not. Those guys in that warehouse were going to kill you, Chris and Alizwa, so you all did what you had to do to survive. Same applies to those guys in that farm. If we didn't kill them, they were going to kill us and Chris. And Ted? Ted was no saint either. The guy was working with René and they weren't going to stop coming after you, so you had to do something. Blackmail or no blackmail, the guy made a choice to get involved in René's dirty doings. He tempered with the brakes of your car trying to kill you but ended up putting Palesa in hospital. Then he kidnapped Chris and took him to that farm. And if we didn't get to him in time, Chris was gonna die there. So you did what you had to do to protect yourself and your loved ones. It ends there."

-Sthandiwe: "Yah hey. A part of me understands that but another part just can't deal with it."

-KG: "Don't let guilt do this to you or it will develop roots and grow. You will be depressed and end up on a ledge. And the same guilt will push you over. I've seen it happen before...Look, I know that learning to live with something like this is easier said than done but hey, you are a survivor, ST. You'll survive this too."

Sthandiwe wiped her tears with her hands.

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for the talk, gazi. But lemme go now before I keep crying here."

-KG: "What is Chris saying about this? Have you talked to him about it?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. And I'm not going to."

-KG: "I'd advise you to. But then again, the decision is yours."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, it's mine. Lemme get out of your hair."

-KG: "And I need to sleep some more."

-Sthandiwe: "Aren't you going to work?"

-KG: "Hello, it's Friday today and I hadn't gone to work even once this week. So why would I go in on a Friday? I took a leave for this whole week. I needed it."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I understand."

-KG: "And I don't feel like going home today. So can I please stick around here?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course. Mi casa, su casa, papi... So, I'll see you later."

-KG: "Thanks. Have a great day."

Sthandiwe nodded then got up and walked out.

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She got back to her bedroom and found Chris still sleeping. She went to sit in front of the mirror and put on some make-up and a red lipstick. Then she tied her hair into a ponytail. Chris woke up when she was putting on her perfume.

-Chris: "Your fragrance would wake me up even from the coffin."

Sthandiwe laughed as she turned around to look at him.

-Sthandiwe: "So cheesy in the morning?...Morning, baby."

-Chris: "Morning, sthandwa sam."

She went to sit next to him on the bed.

-Sthandiwe: "Did you sleep well?"

-Chris: "I was tired so I slept like a baby."

Oh, so obviously she was the only one who couldn't sleep.

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't wanna ask this last night. But how did it happen? I mean the kidnapping."

Chris sighed.

-Chris: "After you left for work on Wednesday, I took a bath then went to see KG in Palmridge. After that I went to see Palesa in hospital then went to meet up with Sakhe at his workplace. And that's where it happened."

-Sthandiwe: "How?"

He chuckled.

-Chris: "They used the oldest trick in the book but I was too stupid to see it... After I left Sakhe's office I walked to Palesa's car in the the parking lot. I was walking, minding my own business, when this lady came up to me asking me to help her with something on her phone. And as I was still looking at the screen, someone came from behind and injected me with something. Then it was lights out to me and when I came to, I was tied up to a chair in that dingy bedroom. With these five guys standing in front of me. When I asked them what was going on none of them answered, they all just walked out. But I just knew that it was Reneé's doing, no one else. Then that got confirmed yesterday morning when Reneé came in. And you know the rest."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm really sorry you had to go through all of that. And it happened because of me. I'm so sorry."

-Chris: "Hey, hey, don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault, okay? Reneé and only Reneé is responsible for what happened. And as long as she's still out there, she's gonna do more."

-Sthandiwe: "Not if I can help it."

-Chris: "Whatcha gonna do?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll tell you later...We are gonna have to go see an orthodontist about that tooth. And when they give you an okay for an implant, I'll settle the bill. No denture for you."

-Chris: "No, babe, you don't have to do that."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I do. You lost that tooth because of me. And paying for an implant is the least I can do. And I don't want you to be reminded of what happened in that farm every time you look in the mirror and see that gap. It needs to be closed. Please, let me do this for you, babe."

-Chris: "Okay then. But only because you said 'please'."

He laughed and so did Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "And you have to go see a doctor today. You need an X-ray done on that hand to see how many bones are fractured and get all the medical attention you need."

Chris just laughed lightly.

-Sthandiwe: "What? Something funny?"

-Chris: "Yeah, actually. It's funny how you take care of everybody else but yourself. I saw how you took care of Alizwa when he was injured, and now it's me. What about yourself? Did you go see a doctor about your ribs? I saw you taking off a rib belt last night. Did you get it from a doctor? And the pills that are making you sick, did you get the doctor to change them?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I did go to see a doctor. Uncle Vic. But not for a consultation, I only took the rib belt and painkillers just for yesterday. I didn't wanna be distracted by pain out there in that farm. And the painkillers he gave me are really good, I didn't feel any pain. And the rib belt also helped. But I can't use

any of them any more. Rib belts complicate things and uncle Vic said the painkillers are highly addictive. So yeah I ain't taking them no more."

-Chris: "But you can't continue taking the ones you were taking either. You need to go see a doctor, Thandi. Your own doctor. And I mean it."

-Sthandiwe: "And I will...But for now I need to go to work. KG is around, he'll help you with breakfast and with changing your bandages on your wounds and on that hand."

-Chris: "Okay. I guess I'll see you tomorrow then. I'll be over at my parents'. Sure Palesa is there, she got out of hospital yesterday."

-Sthandiwe: "You're right, I completely forgot. I'm sure she called but you now don't have a phone and I had turned mine off yesterday on the farm. And when I turned it on I saw that I have voice messages but I haven't had time to listen to any of them... I'll go see her at your parents' after work. But they are probably going to kick me out when they hear that both their children are injured because of me."

-Chris: "They're not gonna know. I won't tell them the truth and I'm sure Palesa won't either."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. I'll see you there later then. Let me go now."

They shared a baby kiss and the "I love yous" then she grabbed her phone and walked out.

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She walked to the study and went to the shelf to take the file she got from Sihle about Ted. She got his home address then took a lighter from a drawer and lit the file then put it in a stainless steel dustbin, burning it. Then she took that folder with Ted's pictures with his mistress. She put it on the desk then opened another drawer and took out a box of latex gloves. She took out a pair and put them on. She didn't want to take any chances. Then she got a new envelope from a pack of them on the shelf. She took a cloth duster and wiped the photos and put them in the envelope. Then she left the study. She got downstairs in the kitchen and went to open the tap in the sink. She tipped one of her gloved fingers under the water then used the wet finger to moisten the envelope seal and sealed it. Then she put it on the island and made herself some cereal. After eating, she grabbed the car keys and walked to the door with the envelope. And again, before walking out she stopped in front of her parents portrait on the wall.

-Sthandiwe: "This thing with Reneé has gone for far too long, dad. A lot of people have been hurt and it's not gonna stop until I stop it. I stopped seeing Reneé's man but she's still after me because of your company. I gotta do something, dad. I need to stop playing her game. I need to stop sitting back and playing defense when she attacks. I've got to be proactive. I've got to fight her off using a different strategy. I don't know if I will win but I'm ready to fight, my way, not hers. This ends today...And maybe you'll be disappointed in me after this but it's the only way, pops."

She took a deep sigh then walked out.

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She got inside the Corolla and drove off. But before driving to work she drove to Melville. She stopped five houses down from Ted's house and waited. People were passing by but she waited for a suitable one. When a teenage boy walked her way she called him. He came and she handed him the envelope with the photos and a R200 note, and asked him to go put the envelope in the letter box in Ted's house. The boy nodded easily, seeing the R200.

-Sthandiwe: "And hey, I was never here. You don't know me."

The boy nodded and left. Sthandiwe waited until the boy got to Ted's house and left the envelope, then she drove off to work.

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On the other side, Reneé was still up to no good. She went to meet up with her older brother, Ethan, for breakfast at a restaurant in Northcliff where he lived. She walked into the restaurant with her arm in a sling, and went to the table where her brother was sitting waiting for her. As soon as she sat down her brother asked:

-Ethan: "How bad is it?"

-Reneé: "Not that bad. It's a flesh wound. Through and through."

-Ethan: "And she's still out there, unharmed."

-Reneé: "Unfortunately, yes. And I have a feeling she is going to strike first this time. I've hurt the man she loves."

-Ethan: "And when she attacks, we'll be ready for her. And of course, there is the question of why she's still an issue at all. Why is she still alive?"

-Reneé: "I told you, the bitch is smarter and tougher than I thought."

-Ethan: "Well, if you don't want to crawl back to dad with nothing, you better outsmart her."

-Reneé: "And I will...Speaking of dad, is he still coming to mom's funeral tomorrow?"

-Ethan: "I doubt it. He doesn't give a fuck about her death."

-Reneé: "That's really cold and heartless of him. But we can't force him to attend. Let's let him be. I'm just glad you organised everything even though you and mom weren't seeing eye to eye."

-Ethan: "We hadn't talked in 6 years but she was still my mother."

-Reneé: "And as her only children we have to get justice for her. We have to make that bitch Sthandiwe pay for having her killed."

-Ethan: "Just get my Rover back first."

-Reneé: "I'll get someone to go get it this afternoon."

The Land Rover was still outside that farm, she had left it there the night before and hopped into the car of that farmer that came when Sthandiwe and her guys were leaving. The guy took her to his farm and attended to her bullet wounds. And she spent the night in his farm. Then came back to Jo'burg early that morning. She didn't go get the car because she couldn't drive with her shot shoulder.

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At work, Sthandiwe went to conduct her lectures and when she was done she went back to her office. And as she just sat down starting to mark the test papers from the day before, she heard a knock on her door.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, come in."

When she lifted her head up to see who it was she almost screamed out of anger. It was Reneé.

-Sthandiwe: "Hayi usathana uyandivavanya nyani ngoku tshini. [The devil is really testing me now]. What are you doing in my office?"

Insert #51

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Reneé walked in and went to sit on the chair in front of Sthandiwe's desk.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't remember telling you to sit down."

-Reneé: "Bitch, I don't wait for you to tell me what to do. I am not your puppet like Al... Tell me, what did you do to him? What did you give my husband? Love potion? I know how you blacks are."

Just a few days before, Prof Jansen had said Sthandiwe was a ghetto girl, and right at that moment all she wanted to do was to jump over that desk and show Reneé exactly how ghetto she could be. She wanted to kick her ass but that was her workplace, so she couldn't behave like a hoodrat. And she also remembered her parents' teachings. Her mother taught her to be a lady and to always act like one. And her father taught her martial arts but he also told her to be disciplined and only use the art to defend

and protect herself, not to go around beating up people unless they attack first. And at that moment, Reneé was not physically attacking her. So she calmed herself down and zipped her mouth.

-Reneé: "Al still doesn't want me even after you've dumped him and ran back to that moron Chris. He told me that his heart belongs to you. Now tell me that's not love potion. How could he say that after what you did to him?...He is now on a wheelchair because he was shot while saving your ass in that warehouse in Booyens. And how did you repay him? You repaid him by dumping him and kicking him out of your house, because he's now useless to you, right? But no, he's still head over heels in love with you. He doesn't want me, the woman who cares for him, the woman that loves him. What did you do to him? (she slammed her hand on the desk) What did you give him?"

Sthandiwe didn't answer, she just looked at her. She was calm, arms folded, and wasn't planning to exchange any words with that psychotic bitch. And Reneé was evidently trying to piss her off, she was provoking her, but she wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of reacting by shouting or roughing her up at her workplace. So she just looked at her, wondering how she knew about what she was talking about, about her kicking Alizwa out of her house. Because sure Alizwa wouldn't have told her something like that. But then she answered herself, she must have heard all that from Ted. Ted was Alizwa's friend after all, so he must have told him.

-Reneé: "Bitch, it's like you are a demon sent to this Earth to ruin my life. The empire I was building is now crumbling down because of you and your stubbornness. And you haven't only taken my husband away from me, but also my mother. See, I know that you're the one who had my mother killed. The police have nothing on you because you didn't do it yourself. It was one of your puppets on that motorbike. But let me tell you, you may not go to jail but you certainly are not going to enjoy life as if nothing has happened. You are gonna pay for what you did. My brother and I are without a mother now because of you, bitch. So some free advice, always be on the look out for us because we can strike anytime and anywhere. Sweetheart, no one takes from me and live to do it again and again. I'm not gonna lose to you, lil bitch."

Sthandiwe was still just looking at her without saying a word. And when she stopped talking, Sthandiwe let out a smile, but it was disconcerting.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you done?"

-Reneé: "For now."

-Sthandiwe: (calm) "I can't believe you came all this way to say this nonsense. Shame, you must be really bored."

She said that already getting up to open the door for Reneé to leave. She opened it wide then leaned on it.

-Sthandiwe: "Unlike you, I'm not bored, I've got work to do. So, please leave my office now."

Reneé stood up and walked to the door. But at the door she stopped and looked at Sthandiwe.

-Reneé: "You better toughen up some more, it's rough out there."

Then she walked out, leaving Sthandiwe fuming. It was only now that Reneé had left that she was letting her anger show. She knocked the test scripts off her desk and punched the desk, angry.

-Sthandiwe: "The plan I have isn't going to get this bitch off my back for good (she sighed) But still, I have to go ahead with it."

She went back to sit down on her chair and took her phone and called Sihle. She answered.

-Sihle: "Hey, chomi. Sorry, I'm a little busy right now. I'll call you when I'm done. Okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay."

She hung up and left her office, leaving the scripts still on the floor.

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She got to Xolisa's office and knocked. Xolisa told her to come in, so she opened the door and walked in.

-Xolisa: "Look at you, knocking. Now that's what normal people do. They knock before entering other people's offices. You should do it more often, you know."

But she had no time to answer or comment on that.

-Sthandiwe: "Can you believe what just happened?"

-Xolisa: "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "That little devil Reneé was just in my office. She came to threaten me in my own office. Can you believe that?"

-Xolisa: "She has a nerve, hey."

-Sthandiwe: "At first I didn't think I couldn't do it, you know. I guess I can still surprise myself, I mean I know I've surprised her."

-Xolisa: "What are you talking about?"

-Sthandiwe: "I let her walk out of there without me kicking her ass."

-Xolisa: "And you did great. The last thing you need is a disciplinary hearing for fighting at work."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

It was only then that she went to sit down on the chair in front of Xolisa's desk.

-Sthandiwe: "That other day you sounded like you had a plan to take the bitch down. So, please share. What is it? Why did you want to know the detective handling that case?"

-Xolisa: "Did you find out who it is?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not yet, but I'll find out. In the meantime, why don't you tell me about your plan?"

-Xolisa: "Not gonna happen. Yesterday you also didn't tell me what you were doing. You just asked me to go get Ted's car from his workplace and take it to Morningside. And I did without asking any

questions. Can't you just do the same? Just get me the name of that detective and stop asking questions, will you?"

-Sthandiwe: "But, XO, this is different because..."

She didn't finish, she got disturbed by the ringing of her phone. It was Sihle. She answered. Sihle was asking to see her during lunch. But she couldn't wait, so she told her that she was coming to her right at that moment.

-Sthandiwe: (to Xolisa) "I gotta go. But this isn't over. We'll play 'show me yours, I'll show you mine' tomorrow."

-Xolisa: "Fine by me, as long as you'll show me yours first."

He laughed. Sthandiwe just chuckled and walked to the door, shaking her head.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna come back here today so I'll see you tomorrow at my place. Please be there at one o'clock. I'm hosting a thing."

And before he could respond she was out the door.

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She got to Sihle's house and Sihle let her through the gate. She parked in the driveway and walked inside the house. But there was no one in the lounge.

-Sthandiwe: "Sihle!"

-Sihle: "In the kitchen."

She went to the kitchen and found her getting bottled water out of the fridge.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. Please get me some too."

Sihle got the water and handed it to her. And they shared a brief hug before sitting down in the high chairs. There was a file on the counter. Sihle took it but she didn't open it.

-Sthandiwe: "So, what's up?"

-Sihle: "I got what you wanted. But is that why you called earlier?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not entirely. But what did you find?"

-Sihle: "I have a friend in the Park Station Police Station (it's closed down now but remember this happened in 2015), and he got me what you wanted from the Booyens Police Station. Detective Ncube is the lead investigator and his partner is Detective Shepherd. Milani Shepherd. And there's more."

-Sthandiwe: "More?"

-Sihle: "Yeah. Shepherd's husband was one of the men that died in that warehouse. His name was Sam Shepherd. He was also an officer of the law, and he was working undercover when he got shot."

That made Sthandiwe choke on the water, realising they had killed a cop. Sihle looked at her.

-Sihle: "Are you okay?"

Sthandiwe was now coughing. And when that cleared, she answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Do I look like someone under the category of okay, Sihle? One of us, between me, Chris and Alizwa, killed a cop. So no, I am not okay."

-Sihle: "Yeah, I know that's some fucked up shit but none of you knew there was a cop there...And I guess that's why the cops are so determined to find out what happened in that warehouse. And that Shepherd woman is not gonna stop until she knows what happened to her husband. And right now their best bet is Reneé, but they still have no enough evidence against her."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. They just questioned her and she walked."

-Sihle: "Yeah, apparently her lawyer went to get her outta there during the questioning. And with just the wheelchair, the cops won't be able to prove that she was really in that warehouse. And we both know that she didn't kill those guys."

-Sthandiwe: "But the cops don't know that. They think she did it, they just can't prove it. And I'm sure Shepherd is out for her blood so what we need to do is give her exactly what she wants - the proof. That way Reneé would be out of my life and she'd never hurt anyone around me again."

-Sihle: "So you want us to fabricate proof? Frame Reneé? Are you crazy? And how would we even do that?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't have a plan yet. But I'll figure something out."

-Sihle: "You're crazy. And her lawyer would find holes in that so called proof of yours."

-Sthandiwe: "Who's her lawyer?"

-Sihle: "Some guy by the name of Greg Mason."

That last name got Sthandiwe's attention.

-Sthandiwe: "Mason?"

-Sihle: "Yeah. You know him?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. I just know the surname. There was a Mason that was my father's business partner many years ago. He used to visit my father at home sometimes but they had a falling out when I was 19 and I never saw him again. But his name was not Greg and he was definitely not a lawyer."

-Sihle: "Yah, this is not him. Sure the one you're talking about is an old geyser. This one is still young. I have her picture in this file. Took it this morning. When you called earlier, I couldn't talk because I was surveiling him, right here in Rosebank."

She opened the file and showed Sthandiwe the picture. Sthandiwe blanched at the sight of it. And her breathing pattern changed. She gripped onto the counter, running out of breath. A panick attack.

-Sihle: "What's going on, chomi? Are you okay?"

She gave her the water to drink. She did. After a moment:

-Sthandiwe: "I know this guy, Sihle. I know him."

-Sihle: "You do?"

-Sthandiwe: "I got kidnapped when I was 19 and I was kept in a warehouse in Alrode by three guys and this guy was one of them. Two were black and he was the third one. They all raped me, Sihle."

-Sihle: "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. But I only knew him as Greg, as I would hear the other guys call him. I never knew his surname, I never knew that he was the son of my father's former business partner."

-Sihle: "Oh my God. KG did tell us that you were kidnapped 8 years ago but I didn't know that you got raped."

-Sthandiwe: "It happened, I just don't like talking about it. And when my dad came to rescue me he took out the two guys but Greg wasn't there, that's how he survived. And now I'm starting to think that it's his father that kidnapped me. I never wanted to know the details but my father told me that I was kidnapped by his arch business rival. However, he never told me who it was and I never asked."

-Sihle: "Oh boy this is heavier than I thought."

-Sthandiwe: "It's bigger than I thought too. In that warehouse in Booyens, Reneé also told me that I was kidnapped by my father's rival and the same rival is the one that wants my father's company. And Reneé is working for him. She started all of this because of him."

-Sihle: "So what are you gonna do? What do you wanna do?"

-Sthandiwe: "What do I wanna do? Right now, I wanna hunt down Greg Mason and his father Paul Mason, and blow their brains off. But I won't do any of that. My dad always said, in order to function well one needs to be calm, to be focused and prioritise. And right now I need to put my anger aside and focus. My priority is to get Reneé off my back. And I have a plan that will not only get her off my back but also Paul fucking Mason."

-Sihle: "And what's that plan?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll tell you later. Right now I gotta go. But before I go, I need you to do one more thing for me. I need you to check out Reneé's brother for me. Kate's son. Apparently he's also out for my blood. So I wanna know what I'm up against. I want to know who my enemy is."

-Sihle: "Will this ever end?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know. What I know is I gotta get moving now. And please be at my place tomorrow at thirteen hundred hours. I'm having a thing."

She got up and left with that file.

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She drove to Sandhurst and on the way she made a call to the person she was visiting, to ask if he was in and to let him know that she was coming. She got there and after hitting the intercom the gate opened for her. She drove up the driveway and parked in front of the double-storey house, a cool thirty million five if it was a dime. The man of the house was standing inside, on the first floor, by a huge two-storey window in the front of the house. He saw Sthandiwe getting out of her car and motioned for her to get inside. She did. And the 50-year-old, white self-made man whose single pretense is that he has none, descended the staircase to the ground floor to welcome her.

-Sthandiwe: "Uncle Mike."

-Uncle Mike: (smiling) "Thandi. Long time."

-Sthandiwe: "I know."

They shared a brief hug.

-Uncle Mike: "You sounded troubled on the phone. Is everything okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "I won't be okay for long if you don't help me."

-Uncle Mike: "Come, let's go to my study."

They ascended the steps to his study and sat down.

-Uncle Mike: "So, what's going on?"

Sthandiwe told him everything about Reneé and Paul Mason wanting her father's company.

-Sthandiwe: "When my father founded that company and came to you to be an investor years ago, I doubt any of you had an idea that it would be this big. My dad worked so hard to make that company what it is today and now I'm about to lose it. I'm about to lose his legacy."

-Uncle Mike: "You are not gonna lose it."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, I'm not going to lose it to Mason, but if I continue this cycle of mutual destruction with Reneé I might. I can fight Reneé and win but I can't fight Mason. When I defeat Reneé he'd just find another way to worm his way into that company. He wants it and he's not gonna stop."

-Uncle Mike: "So what do you want me to do?"

-Sthandiwe: "My dad always said that you were that company's greatest asset. He trusted you. That's why I want to sell my shares to you. You are back to being the chairman of the board and with both of our portfolios you would be a majority holder, you'd own 85% of that company. So basically it'd be yours and you'd stop Mason from wanting to take over. In your hands, my father's legacy is safe. Maybe he'd be disappointed in me for doing this, but losing the company to you is better than losing it to Mason."

-Uncle Mike: "Mason doesn't give up, huh. He had 10% shares in your father's company but 8 years ago he rebelled and your father forced him to sell. He wanted to buy him out and that made him angry. That's why he had you kidnapped, he wanted to distract your father while he was planning a hostile take over. But he didn't succeed. Your father managed to kick him out and got his 10% shares. He didn't win then and he's definitely not gonna win now."

-Sthandiwe: "Good, you need to stop him in his tracks. I know you can fight him, I can't. I just want him and that Reneé off my back, uncle Mike. I'm really tired, I'm tired of all this fighting. I have a man that I love and I want to live a normal life with him. A life without seeing dead bodies or almost becoming one. So, will you please help me by buying the shares?"

-Uncle Mike: "Of course. And Mason won't take me on."

Sthandiwe smiled.

-Sthandiwe: "That's what I wanted to hear. Thank you, uncle Mike. I'll handle the paperwork. And we'll sign then notify the board in the Monday board meeting."

They shook hands and Sthandiwe left.

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She got to her car and drove off. She was driving to Randburg, and on the way Chris called.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, babe."

-Chris: "Hey, sthandwa sam. How is your day so far?"

-Sthandiwe: "So far so good. How's yours?"

-Chris: "It's okay. I'm from the doctor now and my hand is gonna be fine. There's not much damage."

She smiled.

-Sthandiwe: "That's good news, babe. I'm really glad."

-Chris: "I was just checking on you. And to tell you how much I miss you."

-Sthandiwe: "I miss you too, hun. I'll see you later over at your parents'."

-Chris: "Yeah. And Thandi?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, babe."

-Chris: "I love you. And it's been a long time since anything as good as you has happened into my life."

Instead of smiling, she just became emotional.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you too, Chris wam. [my Chris]"

-Chris: "I'll see you later then."

-Sthandiwe: "Later."

She hung up. And wiped a tear that was now trickling down her cheek. She got to Randburg and went to an office of a PI. A licensed PI, not Sihle. Obviously, whatever she wanted to find out was next level for Sihle.

Insert #52

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After parking in the parking lot of the office building where the PI office was, Sthandiwe took out a notepad from her handbag. She teared off the papers that were written on and wrote down some more notes on the pad. Then she walked out of the car, taking the notepad with her. She got inside the office building and walked to the office of the PI. She found the PI, a man in his late 40s, standing with his assistant by the front desk. She greeted and told him that she was there for him, that she was in desperate need of his services. The PI led the way to his office and offered her a seat.

-The PI: "So how did you hear about me?"

-Sthandiwe: "You come highly recommended."

-The PI: "And who recommended me to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "You did a lot of jobs for my father, Buyisile Blie, when he was still alive."

-The PI: "Oh, you are BB's daughter?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

-The PI: "So, how may I be of service?"

-Sthandiwe: "I have two assignments for you. And I'd be glad if you could do them both concurrently. Get someone else to help you if you have to."

-The PI: "Tell me what you need done then I'll see if I'm up for it."

-Sthandiwe: "I need you to find someone for me. Her name is Minenhle Ngcobo. Born in 1989. She ran away from home in Centurion, Pretoria four years ago and was never seen since. Her family searched for her and they never found her. But apparently she was last seen in Cape Town."

She put the notepad on the desk.

-Sthandiwe: "Everything else you would want to know is in this notepad. So are you up for it?"

-The PI: "What's the second assignment?"

-Sthandiwe: "Paul Mason."

-The PI: "Where do I know that name from?"

-Sthandiwe: "He's a businessman and he was also my father's business partner years ago."

-The PI: "So what do you want to know about him?"

-Sthandiwe: "He's a businessman but if you scratch under the surface you'd find out that he's also involved with a human trafficking syndicate. And until recently, Reneé Parker, daughter of Anthony Parker who's also a businessman, was one of his baits. She'd lure young girls right into his net... See, I already know all of this, I just want you to find me proof. Proof linking Reneé to this guy's illegal activities."

The PI sighed.

-The PI: "Okay, let me put it this way: young lady, you're out of your mind. Those people are organised, sophisticated and meticulous. They don't leave nothing behind. That's how they stay in business."

-Sthandiwe: "There's no such thing. You can't do something and leave no trail behind, no matter how good you are. And now I'm asking you to find it. If you want, your starting point could be a warehouse in Alrode. It's owned by Mason and I think a lot of illegal activities are happening there. The address is in this notepad."

-The PI: "Okay, forget the trail. Those people are dangerous. If I rain on their parade, they will kill me dead."

-Sthandiwe: "But I'm sure you've seen worse. I'm sure you've worked many dangerous cases in your career. And I'd like to think it comes with the territory... Just get me the dossier on these people and name your price. Money is not a problem, I was the only heir to BB's fortune."

The mentioning of a lot of money made him soften up.

-The PI: "Okay, when do you need this?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yesterday would be nice."

-The PI: "I like a challenge. So I'll get on it right away."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. I'll keep in touch."

She shook his hand and left.

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She walked back to her car but as she was opening the door to get in, she heard a:

-Voice: "Thandi Blie?"

She turned to see a 32-year-old white guy standing in the opposite side of the parking lot, just gotten out of his car.

-Sthandiwe: "Cole? Wow."

-Cole: "It is really you."

They walked towards each other and hugged.

-Cole: "Wow. How have you been?"

-Sthandiwe: "Good, good. And you?"

-Cole: "I'm okay. It's been a long time since I saw you."

-Sthandiwe: "One thousand and sixty nine days to be exact."

-Cole: "You've been counting?"

-Sthandiwe: "Only because it was a day after my parents' funeral."

-Cole: "Yeah, you're right. And how have you've been coping? I'm sorry I never kept in touch, I lost your number."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, it's okay. And I've been okay, I mean I can't change what happened...And how's everything going with you? Sure you and your wife have a little one now."

-Cole: "No. Actually, we got divorced last year. No kids."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Cole. You guys seemed perfect together."

-Cole: "Yeah, maybe three years ago when we got married. A year later things changed for the worst. But I'm over that now. I'm seeing someone new. And she's amazing."

-Sthandiwe: "And you really are in love with her. Your eyes just lit up."

-Cole: "That I am. She's great but hey you know my dad, he doesn't like her."

-Sthandiwe: "He'll come around eventually. And hey speaking of your dad, I just saw him. I was just at your home about an hour ago. And now I'm seeing you, weird, isn't it?"

Yeah, Cole was uncle Mike's son and he and Sthandiwe got to know each other as their fathers were friends and business partners.

-Cole: "Not really. I stay around here and my office is in this building so you were bound to see me...You know, I haven't been to Sandhurst in months. My dad manages to piss me off every time we're together. So I decided to just stop visiting him."

-Sthandiwe: "Family politics, huh."

-Cole: "Yeah...Anyway, would you mind if we go for some drinks right now and just catch up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh...sorry, not now. There's somewhere I gotta be and I'm already running late. Raincheck?"

-Cole: "Okay. How about tomorrow or Sunday?"

-Sthandiwe: "Still not possible. I already have plans. Sorry."

-Cole: "Okay, let's do it this way. Just give me a call when you're free. Okay?"

He said that taking out his card from his pocket and handed it to her.

-Sthandiwe: "Sure. I'll do that."

She said her goodbyes and got in her car. She started the engine and drove off.

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She drove to a diverse manufacturing company right there in Randburg. She parked, got out of the car and made for the entrance. She talked to the receptionist and told her that she wanted to see Mrs Thumeka Bonani. The receptionist gave her the "You can't see the manager without an appointment" speech.

-Sthandiwe: "Sisi, just tell Thumeka that Sthandiwe Blie is here to see her. She knows me."

After giving her a run around, the receptionist called Thumeka's office and when she hung up she told Sthandiwe that Mrs Bonani says she can go through. Sthandiwe gave her the "I told you so" look then walked away. She got to Thumeka's office and Thumeka offered her a seat. Thumeka was in her late thirties, and was the microbiologist Sthandiwe called when she wanted the bacterial strains for Xolisa. They briefly talked about this and that then Thumeka asked:

-Thumeka: "So to what do I owe this visit?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's not a social visit. I'm here to ask you for a favour... This morning I saw online that this company has a vacant post. And I have someone to fill it. So please make it happen."

-Thumeka: "But, Thandi, we have a PR department. They handle the hiring and firing. I don't have a say in that."

-Sthandiwe: "Sis' Thumeka, please don't give me that. You are the manager here, you can make this happen. People do this all the time, they use their connections to get jobs. In this case, you are my connection and you are going to help me... And let's not forget that you got this job because of my father's connections. A favour deserves another, right?"

-Thumeka: "Is your candidate even qualified?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, he is. He has a Bachelor's Degree in the same field as me. And that is the requirement for this job."

-Thumeka: "Fine, send me his resumé and I'll talk with the PR department."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you. I'll email you the resumé."

She then said her goodbyes and left.

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Her last stop before going over to Chris' home was at a BMW dealership in Melrose Arch. She spent an hour there doing what she needed to do then drove to the Motaung house. She got there around 17:30 and hit the intercom. She was let in and she drove up the driveway and parked next to Palesa's TSI. It was there, clearly Chris went to get it where he left it when he got kidnapped. She got out of the car and went to the back terrace where everyone was. The idyllic terrace was overlooking the pretty garden and a pool with automated cover in the backyard. The Motaung's were well off, and their house was really magnificent and chic. She found Mr Motaung, Mrs Motaung, Chris and Palesa sitting there. She greeted and sat down. Mr and Mrs Motaung loved her and they knew her only as Palesa's friend, they didn't know about her and Chris. She used to visit with Palesa before she even met Chris. Then when she started dating Chris, Chris wanted to let his parents know about their relationship but she never wanted that. She was afraid that if things don't go well between them then things could be awkward between her and his parents if they know. He, on the other hand, wanted to show her how serious he was about her by letting his parents know about them. But she wouldn't have that because even though she loved him she didn't really trust that their relationship would go far. She told him it was still early for that so he should wait and he complied.

Anyway, she sat down next to Palesa and asked how she was feeling after being discharged from the hospital.

-Palesa: "I'm okay, except for the fractured rib. Yoh, it hurts like hell."

-Sthandiwe: "I know what you mean. But it will heal eventually."

-Mrs Motaung: "Have you ever had a fractured rib?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah...ummh, years back."

She couldn't tell them that she currently had bruised ribs because that was going to raise flags. They would definitely ask themselves why all of them - Sthandiwe, Chris and Palesa - got injured around the same time. They'd probably put two and two together and realise that it was no coincidence, and she didn't want that so she lied. They all chilled there, chatting over some drinks and snacks. And just like teenagers, Chris and Sthandiwe would occasionally steal glances at each other and smile when they thought no one's looking.

After a while, Sthandiwe asked to talk to Palesa alone. So they walked inside the house and went to Palesa's bedroom.

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They got to the bedroom and sat on the bed.

-Sthandiwe: "You ended up in hospital because of me, chomi, and I'm sorry."

-Palesa: "Hey, don't worry about it. It wasn't your fault, I don't blame you. And don't worry, my folks don't know the truth."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. Thanks for not telling your parents the truth. The last thing I need is for them to hate me."

-Palesa: "Chris told me what happened to him in that farm...But, chomi, this is getting out of hand."

-Sthandiwe: "I know and I'll take care of it. I promise."

-Palesa: "So, you and him are officially back together now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I know I did him wrong but we are past that now."

-Palesa: "Oh."

-Sthandiwe: "You don't sound happy about it."

-Palesa: "It's not that. It's just that I don't want him to get hurt again."

-Sthandiwe: "That makes the two of us. I really love Chris, Lisa. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me...apart from all of you my friends. And I'd never hurt him again. What happened with Alizwa was a mistake. A mistake that'll never happen again."

-Palesa: "Then, in that case, I'm happy for you, guys. Chris really loves you."

-Sthandiwe: "I know and I'm gonna hold on to him."

Palesa smiled.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, speaking of past boyfriends. I met your ex in that farm yesterday."

-Palesa: "My ex? Which one?"

-Sthandiwe: "Your ex from varsity. The one that was abusing you. Siphon."

-Palesa: "That bastard? What was he doing there?"

-Sthandiwe: "He dropped out of varsity, remember? So I guess he became a low-life thug. He was one of Renee's guards there. And he had his gun pointed to me, and Chris was standing between us. I asked him to drop the gun and walk away but he didn't listen. So I had to drop him. If I didn't, he was gonna shoot both me and Chris."

-Palesa: "He always had a problem listening. In varsity you told him to stop making me his punching bag but he didn't listen. So you ended up breaking his arm."

-Sthandiwe: "So you're not mad at me for smoking him?"

Palesa laughed.

-Palesa: "Are you crazy? Why would I be? Minus one thug in Jozi. Good riddance."

Sthandiwe just let out a weak smile.

-Palesa: "I could never hate you for what you did, chomi. In fact, I love how you protect your loved ones. You protected me from that bastard five years ago and even now you shot him to protect yourself and Chris. So I should be thanking you. Thanking you for rescuing Chris from that bitch Reneé and her goons."

They sat there chatting some more about other things until it was a little before 20:00 and Sthandiwe felt it was time for her to leave.

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She got downstairs and found Chris still with his parents in the terrace and told them that she was leaving.

-Mrs Motaung: "But Buyi is almost done with supper so why don't you stay?"

Buyi was the helper in the Motaung household.

-Sthandiwe: "Ummmh, I would love to, Ma, but there's somewhere I gotta be. So I really need to go. But I'll stay next time."

Mrs Motaung understood and let her go. Chris offered to walk her out.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry I couldn't stay for supper. I'm really exhausted I need to go home and rest."

-Chris: "It's okay. And it's a good thing because I won't have to look at you sitting across the table and pretend as if I don't want to just take you into my arms and kiss you."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "You're so naughty."

They got to the driveway.

-Sthandiwe: "I see you got Palesa's car back."

-Chris: "Yeah, I went to take it from that parking lot this morning. The key was actually still in the pocket of my jeans. Those motherfuckers didn't take it out."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good."

She leaned against her car and looked at the hand brace on Chris' hand.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad your hand is gonna be okay... And again, I'm sorry for what happened."

-Chris: "You worry yourself too much. Stop apologising, will you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, I've turned you into something you're not. I've turned you into a killer. When I saw what you did to that guy in that bedroom, when I saw him lying in the pool of his own blood, I realised the magnitude of what I've done to you."

-Chris: "You don't have to worry about that. And frankly, I would kill all over again for you. And I would literally take a bullet for you. Sounds cheesy I know, but it's true."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't deserve you."

-Chris: "Yes, you do. And I'd like to think this whole thing has only brought us closer together. It has made me see what's really important. What really matters in my life, and that is you. I love you, Sthandiwe. You scare the hell out of me but I love you anyway."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "You scare me too but I love you anyway."

Chris leaned in and kissed her. The kiss got intense and they got lost in their own world, completely forgotten that they were at Chris' parents house. They were still at it when they heard Mrs Motaung clearing her throat behind them. They broke the kiss and looked at her, she was standing by the front door.

-Mrs Motaung: "I didn't think you were still here, Thandi. Anyway, supper is ready so you can both come in."

-Chris: "We're coming, Ma."

She walked inside and closed the door.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh boy, I didn't want them to find out like this."

-Chris: "They were gonna find out eventually. So now is good a time as any."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess. But lemme get going. I can't go in there and face them. I'll see you tomorrow at my house. I'm having a little something, a get together with all of my friends. I've already told Palesa. KG, Sihle and Xolisa will also be there."

-Chris: "Okay, that's nice. I'll sure be there...But what about Renéé? Shouldn't we be figuring out how to deal with her?"

-Sthandiwe: "Bob Marley once said 'The people that make this world worse don't take a day off, so why should I?' I also know that Renéé is evil and she doesn't take a day off but I will. I'm not Bob Marley. And my life certainly doesn't revolve around Renéé and her evilness."

-Chris: "Okay then, I hear you. I'll see you tomorrow."

They shared a baby kiss, and she got inside her car and left.

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She got home after 20:30 and the lights were lit meaning KG was still there. She got in using her own key but KG was not downstairs. She went upstairs and called out for him but he didn't answer. She went to his bedroom, he wasn't there. Okay, that was odd and her heart started racing. But she decided to first go in her bedroom and close the curtains before calling his number. As she was standing by the window

closing the curtains, she saw him sitting on a lounge in the backyard by the pool. She let out a sigh of relief. Then finished closing the curtains and walked downstairs and out the back door to him.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, what are you doing out here?"

-KG: "Watching the stars. It always relaxes me."

-Sthandiwe: "Can I sit with you?"

-KG: "Take another lounge."

-Sthandiwe: "No, I wanna sit with you so shift."

He did and she sat next to him and they cuddled. With her head rested on his chest and his hand around her.

-Sthandiwe: "Do you remember the last time we laid like this together, watching the stars?"

-KG: "Of course. It was 7 years ago and we were on the roof of my backyard flat."

-Sthandiwe: "We were both down and stressed. I was having man problems and you were stressed because you hadn't gotten a sponsor to cover your Honours year the following year...So what are you stressed about now?"

-KG: "I was just thinking about my daughter."

-Sthandiwe: "Yah, I'm sure it still hurts. But if you wanna talk about it, know that I'm here. Okay?"

-KG: "No, I'm fine. I don't wanna talk about it...So what's your excuse for wanting to sit out here?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm also troubled. My love life is somewhat complicated."

-KG: "But I thought you and pretty boy were doing okay."

-Sthandiwe: "And who's pretty boy now?"

-KG: "Chris. No offense but the guy is too pretty for a man."

Sthandiwe nudged him with her elbow.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, don't say that about him."

-KG: "It's true but I won't say it again...Anyway, what's complicated about your love life? You still want Alizwa?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know this is fucked up but I really fell so hard for that guy and I can't just reverse those feelings. I know that I shouldn't be with him or even love him still but I just can't help it. Don't get me wrong, I love Chris, I really do and I don't want to hurt him again. But I also love Al... I love them both but in different ways. Does that even make sense?"

Insert #53

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KG pushed her off of him. She sat up straight, and so did he, and he looked at her.

-KG: "What did you just say?...Remember me asking you about this the other day, and what did you say?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know, I know. But you still haven't answered my question. What I just said, does it make sense?"

-KG: "You are asking a wrong person, buddy. I don't know anything about matters of the heart. You know me, I just tap and go. I've never fallen in love...well up until now."

-Sthandiwe: "Up until now? Whoa! Who are you falling for?"

-KG: "We aren't talking about me here, we're still talking about you...See, even though I don't know much about love, I'll tell this much: Chris loves you and as your best buddy, I know what's good for you. And that is Chris. You are only attracted to Alizwa because you know he's bad for you. No offense, but it's like you get a kick out of falling for bad guys."

-Sthandiwe: "Ouch, that hurts."

-KG: "It's the truth and you need to hear it. You keep falling for bad guys and when they hurt you, you cry but you never learn. And now you've found a perfect guy but you wanna screw that up. For what? For a good d*ck with a lot of baggage? For a lying bastard that's gonna hurt you again? Come on, ST."

He said that already reclining back on the lounge.

-Sthandiwe: "You're right, I shouldn't be with Al, for obvious reasons. I need to forget about him. Now that's not gonna be easy but it's something I gotta do...I need to focus on Chris. The guy really loves me...You know what he said to me today?"

-KG: "What did he say?"

-Sthandiwe: "After all the shit I've put him through he still said it's been a long time since something as good as me has happened into his life. And that made me emotional because I know that I don't deserve it. I've hurt him."

-KG: "I can't believe I'm saying this, but what does the bible say about love? It says love doesn't keep record of wrong doings, or something like that...Point is, the guy loves you and he's over what you did to him. So what you need to do now is to stop repeating the same shit and give the guy the love he deserves. Forget about Alizwa. Case closed."

-Sthandiwe: "And you're right."

-KG: (smiling) "And that tends to happen a lot. Like 95% of the times."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh boy, why did I say that out loud?"

-KG: "Because you know it's true."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, you can be smart when you want to...You know, Chris also said this whole Reneé thing has actually brought us closer together. He says now he sees what really matters in his life, and that's me."

-KG: "Difficult situations impact relationships in one of two ways. They either tear people apart or strengthen their connection, binding them tightly in a common objective...He didn't leave you in this situation, he actually did the opposite, he stood by you, risking his life. Now, I'm not an expert but I think that's love. You need to hold on to the guy."

-Sthandiwe: "I hate it when you're right...Anyway, who are you falling for?"

He sighed.

-KG: "Palesa."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "Who? Palesa as in Palesa Motaung. The one who's my friend?"

-KG: "Yeah. I can't stop thinking about her ever since I met her. I've never felt this way before, ST, and I think it's what y'all call love."

-Sthandiwe: "Yoh, buddy, that may be a problem 'cause Palesa has a boyfriend. She's in a serious relationship with Siya."

-KG: "That won't be a problem if she also feels the same way I do, and I have a feeling she does...How do you put it in Xhosa? Umntu uthathwa emntwini, right?"

Sthandiwe laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. So when are you gonna tell her how you feel?"

-KG: "I dunno but it's gonna happen."

-Sthandiwe: "Not that I'm encouraging you but she's gonna be here tomorrow. So maybe you can use that chance."

She told him about the small get-together and he got excited, only because he was going to see Palesa again.

-Sthandiwe: "But what about Gugu? She just died, KG, and she hasn't even been buried yet."

-KG: "Gugu was not my wife, ST. She wasn't even my girlfriend. I told you this. We just had an arrangement and when she got pregnant with my daughter, I decided to do the right thing and stick with her. That's all it was. It didn't mean I loved her."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I hear you. That would also explain why you haven't been talking about her death but only your daughter's...Anyway, I'm starving. What did you eat?"

-KG: "Pizza. There's still a lot more in the kitchen."

They both got up and went inside. She devoured the pizza like there was no tomorrow. Then they went to sleep.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe woke up early and did her laundry then cleaned the house. Needless to say, she still experienced the nausea episode. And she was still taking her NSAIDs. KG woke up just before 10 and went downstairs. He found her finishing cleaning in the kitchen, taking out the trash.

-Sthandiwe: "Good morning."

-KG: (yawning) "Morning. What's for breakfast?"

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, this is not a B&B and I certainly am not your mama. So you better go get some fresh bread and make breakfast for the both of us. But no eggs, please."

-KG: "Fine. I'll do that. But I need to take a shower first."

-Sthandiwe: "Do that."

Sthandiwe walked out the back door with the trash and KG went upstairs to take the shower. Sthandiwe came back in and went upstairs to also take a shower. When KG was done, he went to buy the bread and other ingredients. Then came back and made the breakfast. They were both sitting down finishing eating that breakfast when Sthandiwe's florist arrived. She went to open the door for her and she came in with the white lilies.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. Right on time. But where's everything else? You did receive my email yesterday, right?"

-The Florist: "Yes I did and I replied...Don't worry, my minibus will be here soon, with everything you requested."

-Sthandiwe: "That's a relief. I didn't see your email reply. Thing is, I got so busy yesterday, I didn't have time to read any of my emails."

-The Florist: "No worries, I would never let you down, you're my loyal client."

Sthandiwe had asked the florist to organise everything for the braai she was going to have with her friends. The lady wasn't only a florist. She was also an events planner and a caterer. She also had an upscale gift shop in Rosebank, where Sthandiwe got the MacBook for Lerato (Chris' sister). Sthandiwe led the way to the kitchen, where KG was.

-Sthandiwe: "KG, please stay here and assist the ladies when they set up in the backyard. It's Saturday today so I have to go to the cemetery. But I'll be back soon."

-KG: "Me? Hey, I gotta go to Palmridge to get clothes to change into."

-Sthandiwe: "I can go get them for you. Just give me your flat keys and tell me what clothes to bring and I'll bring them. Plus I need to see MaKhumalo."

-KG: "You do? What do you need to see her for?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's between me and her. You know that MaKhumalo is like a mother to me."

-KG: "Okay, lemme ask no more. I'll stay, you go."

He gave her the keys to his flat and told her what she should bring. Sthandiwe wanted MaKhumalo to get her KG's resumé without him knowing, she wanted to surprise him. After getting the keys, she took the lilies and left for the cemetery.

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She got to the cemetery and cleaned the graves as usual. Then she put the flowers and sat down on her father's side.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, dad. I've decided to sell your firm. I know that you're probably disappointed in me right now but it was the only way. That company has turned to be a curse in my life, I now have enemies because of it. That's why I had to get rid of it. I hope you understand."

Then she got up and went to back to her car. She got in and drove off to Palmridge.

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She got to Palmridge and found MaKhumalo home since it was a Saturday. She asked her if she could get her the resumé and luckily she had it in her emails because KG had sent it to her when she was organising a job for him 3 months earlier. But that job didn't pan out. So Sthandiwe gave her her email address and asked her to forward the resumé to her and she did. Then she went to get the clothes from KG's flat. But before leaving she asked MaKhumalo to not let it slip to KG that she had asked for his resumé. Then she left and drove home.

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She got home and the florist and her assistants had already left. Everything was already set in the backyard. It was a hot day so they had set up a small tent next to the gazebo and under it there was a buffet table, all the snacks and braai side dishes were there. And under the gazebo was another table with six chairs where they were going to sit and eat. There were plates and champagne glasses on it. The meat for the braai was in the kitchen and all the drinks (soft drinks and booze) were there. Sthandiwe was satisfied. KG went to change into the clothes Sthandiwe had brought then came downstairs.

-KG: "So when's everybody gonna be here?"

-Sthandiwe: "You mean Palesa, right?"

-KG: "No, I mean everyone. The guys, actually."

-Sthandiwe: "They'll be here any minute from now."

And just then there was a knock at the door. Sthandiwe went to open, and it was Chris and Palesa. She hugged them both and let them inside.

-Palesa: "I didn't know what to bring so I got you chocolates."

She handed her the box of chocolates.

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you, chomi. But you didn't have to."

-Chris: (smiling) "Don't say that, babe. Just accept the gift. You know Lisa is such a baby, you do not want to hurt her feelings."

-Palesa: (laughing) "Chris, come on, really?"

-Chris: "You know I'm right...Anyway, where's KG?"

-Sthandiwe: "In the kitchen."

They all went to the kitchen and found him drinking whiskey.

-Chris: "Party for one?"

-KG: "Just taking the edge off."

-Palesa: "Oh. Why though?"

-KG: (nervously) "Nothing. Nothing."

Sthandiwe looked at him and just wanted to burst in laughter. She knew why she was drinking, and he was so nervous because Palesa was around. They all sat on the high chairs and had some drinks waiting for Sihle and Xolisa to arrive. Xolisa arrived before Sihle and she came last.

-Sihle: "I didn't bring anything, chomi, because you didn't tell me what this is, you just told me that you're having a thing. And I didn't know what a 'thing' is."

-Xolisa: "She said the same thing to me too and didn't even give me a chance to ask. So what's going on? Why are we all here?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's nothing much, it's just a little something to say thank you to each and everyone of you for what you did for me. I wanted to thank you all at once."

-Sihle: "Aww! Ain't you just sweet."

Then the guys took out the meat and went to braai it outside by the pool. The ladies took out the drinks and French champagne and went to sit under the gazebo. Just chatting having some snacks while waiting for the guys to finish the braai. And the guys were all getting along just fine by the pool, like they were old buddies. They were having beers except for Chris, he doesn't drink.

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When they were done they took the meat to the table. They all went to dish up for themselves from the buffet table then went to sit down at the table under the gazebo. But before eating they had to have a toast. So they all poured champagne in their glasses, including Chris - the non-drinker. And Sthandiwe made her super long speech.

-Sthandiwe: "Really, guys, thank you. All of you played a role in my being here today. If it wasn't for each and everyone of you I wouldn't be here right now. I'd probably be in Hillbrow, drugged up and selling my body for that guy. That's what he wanted. Or even worse, I would have been shipped off to the Middle East or another foreign country to be a sex slave."

-Chris: "None of us here was gonna let that happen."

-Sthandiwe: "Hence I'm thanking you, guys...When Reneé took me, Chris was the first person to know about it. And even though we weren't on speaking terms then, he didn't just shift that aside, he tried to get me help. He called Palesa and asked her to do something since he couldn't. Then he took the first available flight out of Cape Town and came up here to save my life, risking his in the process. (looking at him) I never knew how much I meant to you until that happened. So, baby, from the bottom of my heart, thank you."

Chris smiled.

-Chris: "Anytime, sthandwa sam. And I'd do it all over again if and when I have to."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you...And Palesa. Chomi yam [my friend], when Chris called you telling you what had happened to me, you dropped everything you were doing and ran around this Jozi like a headless chicken looking for help. You ran to Sihle but you didn't find her. You went to the police but they sent you away. But you didn't give up, you went back to Sihle so you could work together and find me. You didn't go home to your boyfriend even though he was nagging you with phone calls asking you to. And hey, I shouldn't forget to mention your car. The guys used your car to go to Booyens to rescue me and it also got us back here. So, thank you, chomi yam. I really appreciate everything you did."

-Palesa: "I didn't do much though but I want you to know that you can always lean on me, always."

-Sthandiwe: "You're so modest...And Sihle. Oh, chomi, where do I begin? When Palesa came to you, you dropped your family and went out in search for me. You were the only one who knew about my story with Ted, Alizwa and Reneé then, well except for Chris who wasn't here. You, together with Palesa, went to Ted, he led you to Alizwa and Alizwa led you to KG who in turn led you to where everything had happened. And when y'all found my location, you wanted to risk your life and go with the guys to the warehouse just to save me. That's how much I mean to you. And I would never take that lightly. So, thank you, chomi."

-Sihle: "You're gonna make me cry... But I want you to know that I love you, chomi. And I'd do anything for you."

-Sthandiwe: "You are amazing...And you, KG. You know I love you, gazi. And what you did for me in this past week is nothing short of amazing and heroic. When Alizwa called you that night telling you I was

kidnapped, you were at the hospital for your daughter. But when you heard what had happened to me you left it all and went to meet up with Alizwa and the girls. You are the one who took them to Soweto where I was taken. Without you, they wouldn't have known where to look. And when y'all had gotten my location, you supplied the guys with the weapons. Without those, they wouldn't have been able to get me out of that warehouse. They would have died there because those guys were armed and were ready to shoot with extreme prejudice. So thank you, gazi."

-KG: "It didn't even seem like something big when I was doing it. I was only doing something that I was supposed to do for my best friend. It's what friends do. And I didn't even expect a thank you."

-Sthandiwe: "You really are my brother from another mother...And finally, you XO. When you found everybody here that day and got to hear what had happened to me, you decided to drop everything and go with them to go look for me. And when y'all found that video, Xolisa, you're the one who took it to a computer wiz who in turn traced my location. Without you doing that, I doubt you would all have found me in time. In addition to that, you organised body armour for the guys. Without that, Alizwa was gonna die in that warehouse. Something that was gonna lead back to us, and haunt us like hell in many ways than one. And hey, not forgetting your driving skills. You took the guys to Booyens and got us all out of there at a speed of The Transporter. So thank you, XO. You're now more than just a colleague to me, and you are not even just a friend, you're family."

-Xolisa: "Hey, you know that I've always had a soft spot for you. Chris, please don't kick my ass (they all laughed). You know that I always take an opportunity to play your hero with both hands. And when you got kidnapped, it was no different, I did what I do best."

They all laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "You know, when my parents died, and me being the only child, I thought I was left alone on this Earth. With no one to turn to. But y'all showed me that I was wrong. You showed me that I have a family in all of you...And my father used to say: in time of crisis, our loved ones become our liabilities. But he forgot to add that they could also be assets. In time of crisis in my life y'all became assets. And you still are assets, and that is not something I take lightly. I really love you, guys, and I appreciate each and everyone of you."

-Sihle: "Now you're gonna make us all cry, like really."

-Sthandiwe: "Please don't do that, don't cry...Another thing that my father taught me is that in this life, the only person I can always depend on is myself, no one else. But hey y'all proved him wrong. You've shown me that I can depend on you. Guys, I owe you my life. What you did for me is huge and I would never down play it. So, I want you all to know that you can always depend on me too. Anything you need just come to me. Anytime. You guys are my family...So here's a toast. (they lifted their glasses) To family."

-Everyone in unison: "To all of us."

They all laughed at the fact that they all said the same thing at the same time as if rehearsed. Then they clinked their glasses and took their sips. Then they ate, chatting, laughing, just enjoying each other's company. Well up until they heard the sound of the doorbell. Sthandiwe got up and went inside the house to see who it was.

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She went to open the front door and it was a courier guy. He gave her a box and asked her to sign. She did and he left. She was curious as to what it was so she quickly removed the wrapper. It was a medium-sized gift box. She opened it and inside she found a card and a small gift box. Before opening the small gift box, she wanted to read the card and see who it was from. So, before even reading the message in the card, her eye immediately went to the bottom of the card to see the name of the sender: Alizwa. She was about to read the message when she heard a voice behind her.

-Voice: "Who was it?"

Startled, she quickly turned to the voice, hiding the box behind her. It was KG and he had already seen the box.

-KG: "Let me guess, that's from Alizwa."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. But I don't know what it is. Or even why he has sent it."

-KG: "Just remember what I said to you last night...And lemme just go to the kitchen and get the whiskey glass I came to get."

He left her standing there, still holding the box and the card behind her.

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Sthandiwe ran upstairs to the study and put the box in the drawer, without even checking what was inside or even what was written on the card. Then she went back to the others in the backyard and joined in on the conversation as if nothing had happened. And none of them asked who was at the door, they just continued with what they were doing.

-Chris: "Spending time together is nice, isn't it? We should do it again sometime soon. As y'all know, I'm going back to Cape Town tomorrow. But you can all visit. An all expenses paid trip. Paid by yours truly. On the weekend of next week. What do you all say?"

-Sihle: (smiling) "You mean that?"

-Chris: "Of course."

-KG: "And I've never been to Cape Town before. So hell yeah, I'm gonna be there, bro."

They were all excited about the trip. They were happy. Well, up until:

-Palesa: (to Sthandiwe) "This...I mean what you have done for us, chomi, is really nice."

-Sthandiwe: "It's nothing compared to what y'all did for me... And it was long overdue, for which I apologise."

-Palesa: "Well, we've all been a little busy."

-KG: "Because of Reneé."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. But still, Reneé shouldn't keep us from properly celebrating our friendship. And my rescue."

-Xolisa: "Speaking of Reneé, the road is still long. She's still out there and it's just a matter of time before she regroupes."

-Sihle: "Do we really have to talk about that bitch now? Just the mentioning of her name is enough to fuck up my mood."

-Chris: "Sorry, Sihle, but we have to talk about her. So, any theories about her next move?"

-Sthandiwe: "She came to my office yesterday to threaten me. Saying I may wanna keep out an eye for her and her brother because they can strike at anytime and anywhere."

-Chris: "And why am I only hearing about this now?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry. I just didn't see it as something important."

-Chris: "Anything that involves that crazy woman and a threat to your life is important, Thandi. You should have said something yesterday."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry."

-KG: "So what did you do? What did you say to her?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing. I couldn't do anything, we were at my workplace."

-KG: "She should thank her white ancestors because if it was me, I wasn't gonna afford her any mercy. I was gonna kick her skinny ass and deal with the consequences later...But it's okay, I'm still gonna get her and put a bullet in her head."

-Sthandiwe: "No, KG...I thought about it and we shouldn't kill her."

-KG: "What? Why not? That woman deserves to die, ST. And one of these days, I'm gonna go straight to her house and blow her brains out. Then, ST, you'll be free. Hell, we'll all be free."

-Sthandiwe: "Are you crazy, KG? You can't go there. She lives in a gated mansion, and I'm sure by now she has guards there. So getting in will be suicide."

-KG: "So is the alternative. You just said it yourself, the bitch threatened you. And she has done a lotta shit already. Look what she did to you. To Palesa and to Chris. Who's gonna be next? Me? Sihle? Xolisa? Who? And we may not be lucky to survive."

-Sihle: "Woah, wait. What happened to Chris? Is it Reneé that did this to you, Chris? And why did you lie about it when Xolisa and I asked?"

-Chris: "Let it go, Sihle."

-Palesa: "But I won't let it go. I can't. Actually, I second KG. That psycho put me in hospital and tortured my brother. I can't just forgive that, Thandi. I want revenge. Reneé has to die."

-Sthandiwe: "You see what you have done now, KG? What are you doing putting crazy ideas in her head? (she looked at Palesa) Lisa, I love you, chomi. I really do. But you are not strong enough for what you want to do."

-Palesa: "Stop talking about me as if I'm a child."

-Xolisa: "Whoa, let's back up. What did Reneé do to you, Chris?"

They told Xolisa and Sihle the entire story about Chris' kidnapping. Emotions got high, they were now all angry. And they were all, well except for Sthandiwe, agreeing that they should remove Reneé permanently, because they were all feeling unsafe.

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, we are not going to do that. We aren't going to kill Reneé."

-Xolisa: "Thandi, this is no longer just about you. KG is right, we're all not safe. Reneé almost killed Palesa and she kidnapped Chris, tortured him. And she probably would have killed him if you and KG didn't show up. Way I see it, she wants you to suffer and that means destroying everything you care about. She's not gonna target you but the people around you, to make you suffer. And that's us. So we have to do something."

-KG: "Exactly...Sis', you have a good heart and it's gonna get you into trouble some day. In fact, it's gonna get you or us killed. I don't know why you're defending that snake. Reneé is a viper. And in a viper's nest you have to be a viper too. Stop being soft."

-Sthandiwe: "She's a viper that's only gonna be replaced as soon as we take her out. And she's gonna be replaced by an anaconda, her father. You don't think you can just kill Anthony Parker's daughter and get away with it, do you? That guy doesn't play. Not to mention the fact that the media will be all over the murder. Now the question is, can all of y'all take Anthony on? I mean I know I can't. I know my limit. Guys, we can't afford to be drawing more enemies to us, especially powerful ones."

-Chris: "So what do you suggest? That we let her feast on us?"

-KG: "Hell, I ain't doing that. And, ST, I love you, sis. I do. But you're not gonna change my mind on this one."

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, the task of taking Reneé out of play requires absolute focus. If y'all let your emotions guide you, you will mess up and you will fail...KG, you remember what happened the last time you used your emotions? You shot and killed Reneé's mother while riding on my bike and I ended up being the one on the hot seat in the police station. And that's still not over. I'm sure the police still have their eyes

on me. And what do you think is gonna happen once Reneé also winds up dead? The police are gonna come to me again. I have motive to kill her, remember? They are gonna look into me. And, KG, I can't afford to have cops shining their spotlight on me and my activities. Yes, I would not have killed Reneé, but you know that I'm not a saint. You know the things I've done. So, what do you think the police are gonna find once they start digging very carefully around me?"

-Sihle: "Whoa, KG is the one that killed Kate?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. And he should thank the Phiri ancestors that this is not all over media. And that Anthony is not looking for payback."

-Sihle: "That's probably because nobody really cared or knew about Kate in the business world anymore. Ever since Anthony divorced her, it's like she'd been off grid. And Anthony didn't give a fuck about her either, hence he's not seeking retribution. But with his daughter it's gonna be different."

-Sthandiwe: "Exactly."

-Chris: "And yet again, Thandi, I'm only hearing about this whole thing now. Why? Why do you keep things from me?"

-Sthandiwe: "I was gonna tell you, but I was still waiting for the right time. And things were just happening so fast. I'm sorry."

Chris just looked away, annoyed.

-Xolisa: "Funny, you did that, KG. Funny, you killed that woman riding Thandi's bike. You're the guy that told us that this is not a movie, it's real life. And that in real life, actions have consequences and that we have to be careful. What's this now? Fuckin' irony."

-Sthandiwe: "Point is, KG, Palesa ended up in hospital because of you. Reneé targeted my car, wanting to kill me, because she saw you on my motorbike and thought I was the one who shot her mother. You messed up, KG. And we can't afford that kind of mess again."

-Palesa: (pissed) "KG, is that true? I almost died because of what you did?"

KG looked at Palesa then at Sthandiwe. Oops! Sthandiwe realised that she had just threatened his chances of being with Palesa. He didn't answer Palesa's question, he just got up and walked away. Sthandiwe wanted to follow him and apologise but then decided against it. She decided to just give him his space.

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They remained at the table, and it was now tense.

-Palesa: "Why didn't you let us all know about this sooner, Thandi?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry. At first I also didn't know. I only got to know when the police came for me and took me in for questioning."

-Palesa: "This is fucked up. And I'm very disappointed in you, Thandi. I thought you're my friend."

And with that, she got up and went to sit alone on one of the loungers by the pool. And Chris was just thumbing his new phone (he had bought it the day before, after Reneé's guys had destroyed his old one), not wanting to talk, clearly pissed at Sthandiwe for keeping things from him.

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, you are all safe from Reneé now. She's not gonna come after you, she's gonna come after me and me only. She didn't target Palesa, she was targeting me but got her. And she targeted Chris because she wanted to force me into selling her my shares in my father's company. Actually, she wants those shares for someone else. Paul Mason. He was my father's business partner but they had a falling out and ended up being rivals. And he's the same guy that had me kidnapped 8 years ago. Reneé is working for him. In fact, he's forcing her to get him those shares. But now I have taken care of that. I'm selling all those shares to someone who was friend's with my father. And he's also the chairman of the board in that company. So, once the sale goes through, Reneé or Mason won't have a reason to come after me or to any of you, guys."

She told them the entire story about Reneé and Mason. And about her father and Mason.

-Sthandiwe: "Well, me saying we're all safe is not entirely true. You are all safe except for me. Reneé will still be out for my blood because she still blames me for Alizwa leaving her. And for her mother's death."

Chris raised his head and stopped thumbing his phone.

-Chris: "So you're selling your father's company?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's the only way to make sure that you're all safe. To make sure that none of you gets hurt again just to force me into handing over those papers. Plus, I've realised that I could squash Reneé but I can't beat Mason. So the greatest blow I can strike him with is to sell the company to his nemesis, Mike Wells. He is no match for him. So all in all, both him and Reneé are gonna lose. None of them is gonna win."

-Chris: "That's a tough decision you've made there. I mean, I know how much that company means to you."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I'm doing what I gotta do... And I'm sorry I dragged you all into this. It's my fault that all of these bad things have been happening around us."

-Xolisa: "That's not true. It's not your fault."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes it is, XO. I'm the one who betrayed Chris and got involved with Reneé's husband. And that's how this whole thing started."

-Xolisa: "From the story you've just told, this started way before Alizwa came into the picture. This started when your father had a falling out with this Mason guy. Now he wants what was his. It's got nothing to do with what happened between you and Alizwa. Alizwa and Reneé are both just tools he used or still using to get what he wants. Even if you didn't get involved with Alizwa, he wasn't gonna stop wanting your father's company. And he certainly wasn't gonna stop forcing Reneé to get it for him. And we'd still be where we are right now. And everything that has happened would still have happened. So stop saying it's your fault."

-Chris: "Xolisa is right, babe."

Okay he now seemed completely over the drama of being pissed at her for not telling him stuff.

-Sihle: "And we're gonna help you get through all of this, chomi. We're gonna help you fight Reneé, even though you think the fight doesn't concern us... Right guys?"

Chris and Xolisa both nodded.

-Sihle: "As long as we have each other, we can survive anything."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you, guys. But for this to work we need to put emotions aside and plan this carefully. Just like I planned Ted's murder."

-Xolisa: (shocked) "What? You've killed Ted?"

-Sthandiwe: "On Thursday. When I asked you to go get his car at his office he was already dead. The guy was working for Reneé and he deserved to die for what he did. And unlike Reneé, no one is gonna replace him and attack us now that he's dead."

-Sihle: "Oh boy. So how did you do it?"

She told them the story.

-Sthandiwe: "Venous air embolism. A lot of air into his vein and with the cardiac problems he had, it became fatal. He had difficulty breathing and then his heart stopped. And detecting an air embolism as the cause of death can be tricky since the lethal effects mimic a massive heart attack. So even if they can do autopsy they'll think he died of heart attack. The medical examiner won't find it easy to determine the actual cause of death unless they would be specifically looking for that telltale evidence. And I doubt they would. I mean a man like him who always had problems with his heart now dying of a heart attack is nothing shocking. Plus, he was no important man, so no one would be looking for the tiny details. And his wife was the only family he had. And she won't ask too much questions. Because I'm sure right now instead of hurting because he's dead, she's mad because he had been cheating on her. I sent her the photos of him with his mistress. And when I asked you, XO, to take his car to Tim's apartment complex in Morningside, that was for the wife to think he died coming from his mistress and get angry even more and not ask too much questions surrounding his death. I know the woman he was having an affair with. She lives in the same apartment building as Tim. Same floor. I've seen her there a number of times before. So even if Ted's wife, for some reason, could get the info from the car tracking company about Ted's movements on that day she'd see that he was with his mistress that evening. And even if the mistress could say otherwise she would not believe her. In fact, she won't believe anything anybody says about the unfaithful Ted right now."

-Xolisa: "Wow! You had this planned very well, huh. But weren't you thinking that the mistress would see Ted's car in the parking lot of their building and ask herself why it was there without him?"

-Sthandiwe: "Ted wasn't driving his car that day. He was driving the wife's. His is a black Jeep. But of course when I was busy planning, I didn't know that he was gonna be driving that car that day. It was just something that worked in my favour at the last minute. And I had to ditch my original plan and improvise...And I doubt anything is gonna lead back to me."

-Sihle: "Yoh, the things you do, chomi."

-Chris: "And she scares the hell out of me."

-Xolisa: "But you still love her anyway."

-Chris: (smiling) "That I do."

They all laughed. Then Sthandiwe wanted to go talk to Palesa and apologise once more. But Sihle said she'd go do it herself. She said she'd talk to her and make her see why Sthandiwe didn't get to tell them about what KG did sooner. Sthandiwe let her do it. And she decided to go inside the house and check on KG.

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But when she got inside, KG wasn't there. She went to check him upstairs but he wasn't there either. And when she passed by the open door of her bedroom, she noticed the guns that were in the boot of KG's Corolla were now on the bed. She rushed downstairs and got out the front door to check if the Corolla was in the driveway where she had left it. It was gone, KG was really gone. She got back inside and saw that indeed the Corolla keys were gone. But Mxo's Sprinter keys were still there. She stood there defeated, realising that KG was really mad or hurt by what she had said about him in front of Palesa. The day hadn't turned out the way she had wanted it to. She wanted all of them to be happy together and just bond. But the day just became full of drama instead. KG and Palesa were both pissed at her. It was just fucked up. She let out a heavy sigh and covered her face with both hands. And she was still like that when Chris came inside.

-Chris: "Where's KG?"

She removed the hands and looked at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Gone. He's left. This means he's mad at me."

-Chris: "But we had to know what happened. Sure he'll understand that when he's calm, and he'll forgive you."

-Sthandiwe: "I gotta go talk to him."

-Chris: "Yes, you will talk to him but not now. Just give him space. To be honest, I don't even understand why he's this mad."

Of course, he wouldn't understand because he didn't know that KG had feelings for Palesa. The same Palesa that was now mad at KG for indirectly putting her in hospital, something that she had got to hear from Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "You won't understand."

-Chris: "Let's just go back to the others and enjoy the rest of the day. KG will be fine. And you'll talk to him later."

He took her hand and they walked to the backyard.

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Palesa was now back under the gazebo and she was now over being pissed at Sthandiwe. And that was a relief for Sthandiwe, less drama. But she apologised again, and Palesa just told her to not worry about it. And they all chatted away. But Palesa just couldn't let Reneé's name rest. She just had to bring it up again.

-Palesa: "So how do you plan on dealing with Reneé, Thandi? That crazy woman needs to pay for what she did to us."

Even though Sthandiwe was now tired of talking about Reneé, she answered her.

-Sthandiwe: "See, the shootings that happened in that warehouse in Booyens raised questions that cannot be unasked. One of the guys that died there was an officer of the law, a DPCI officer working undercover to infiltrate a human trafficking ring that those guys were involved in. And his wife is with the Booyens SAPS and she wants answers about her husband's death, she is desperate for an arrest to be made. She wants someone to pay. But they are still scrambling for suspects. They found Reneé's wheelchair at the scene, so she's number one suspect. However, with only just a wheelchair they can't prove that she was there or that she pulled the trigger or have anything to do with human trafficking. So if we could find evidence that she was there and evidence of her involvement in human trafficking we could be giving the cops motive for her shooting or having those guys shot, even though there won't be evidence of her actually pulling the trigger. And Shepherd, the wife of the killed officer, would make sure that she sees the inside of a prison. That way she'd be off my back. And whoever she sends to take care of me thereafter, I won't have a problem taking care of them."

-Sihle: "So you really wanna do this? You wanna frame Reneé?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's not like she's a saint, Sihle."

-Chris: "And you think we could get all this evidence? How?"

-Sthandiwe: "Leave that to me."

-Xolisa: "I may also have evidence putting Reneé at that warehouse that day. I have a surveillance footage showing her getting there and meeting with some of those dead guys at the entrance, then going inside the warehouse. But it also shows her leaving the guys still in one piece. But hey we can always cut that part out, then send the footage to the investigating officer anonymously. That way, they'll have undisputable evidence putting her at that crime scene...that's why I asked you to get me the name of the lead investigator in this case, Thandi."

Then he told them how he got the footage and when. Even though he hadn't told them about it sooner, they didn't become dramatic about it. Sthandiwe and Chris just thanked him for saving their asses by getting the footage showing them in the warehouse too, showing them as the shooters.

-Sthandiwe: "This is great, XO. But sending the footage now would be a little premature. We have to get enough evidence. Evidence that would nail Reneé to the wall, with no way of escaping. Then send it all together. And don't worry I'm already on it."

-Chris: "But don't you think her father will get her out of prison or even use his connections to make sure that she never gets convicted?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, not Anthony Parker. Been reading on him. This is the guy that sent his own son, Reneé's older brother, to prison 15 years ago. The guy raped the daughter of the maid and when Anthony found out, he didn't hesitate to call the cops on him. So even now, when he gets to hear what his daughter is involved in, he won't help her, he'd let the law take its course."

-Sihle: "That's true...I know of Anthony and he doesn't reward his children for doing bullshit. He would never let Reneé escape the law once he hears about her dirty activities. He'd never be in her corner. He'd only do the opposite, which is to make sure that she gets convicted. But hey if we kill her, trust me it would be a different story. Thandi is right, he'd forget the law, hunt us down, kill us himself and get away with it. That's the kind of guy he is."

-Sthandiwe: "So, guys, let's try it this way. Don't worry I'll also take care of the brother."

They all agreed on taking that long shot. Then they continued chatting about other stuff until it was 17:00 and they had to leave. Sihle and Palesa helped Sthandiwe wash the plates, glasses and chafers. The guys packed the chairs and folded the tables. The caterer was going to come pick everything up that evening. Around 18:00 they really had to go. Sthandiwe asked Xolisa to take her to Hyde Park to get Mxo's Sprinter, as it was still there. Then she was going to drive it to Palmridge, so that its owner could get it, and she'd also get a chance to talk to KG. Xolisa didn't have a problem doing that. Sihle was driving her husband's car, so after saying her goodbyes she got in it and drove home, rushing to cook for her family. Palesa left in her car too. Sthandiwe went to get the guns from her bedroom and went to put them in the boot of Xolisa's car. Chris was going to spend the night so they left him in the house.

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Xolisa drove Sthandiwe to Hyde Park, dropped her off in front of the house and let her take out her guns then left. She got inside the house and went to put the guns in the safe. Then left the house, got inside the Sprinter minibus and drove to Palmridge. She got to KG's and saw the Corolla in the driveway, so KG was really home. She couldn't drive in and park the minibus in that short driveway because of the Corolla, so she parked it just outside the gate. Then locked it and got inside the yard. The main house was locked, so she passed and went straight to KG's flat. She knocked, but no response. She tried the handle, the door was unlocked. So she got inside and found KG lying on the bed, eyes closed and with earphones on.

-Sthandiwe: "KG!"

He couldn't hear her with the earphones on. So she walked up to him and took the earphones off, startling him. He quickly opened his eyes.

-KG: "What the fuck?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, buddy, I didn't mean to startle you."

He sat up straight on the bed.

-KG: "What do you want, Sthandiwe?"

O-kay, he called her by her full name, that meant he was really mad at her.

-Sthandiwe: "I've brought Mxo's Sprinter. It's outside the gate. And I also came to apologise for saying what I said in front of others earlier."

-KG: "You didn't just say it, Sthandiwe. You told them...But you promised, Sthandiwe, remember? You promised that you wouldn't tell them. Then bam, you just blurted it out like that. And now I'm sure Palesa hates me."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm really sorry, buddy, I didn't say it on purpose. It just slipped out. But I'll fix it. Palesa doesn't hate you, she's just hurt and disappointed in you. But I'll talk to her and make her see the obvious, that you didn't directly put her in hospital. Reneé and only Reneé did that. She shouldn't blame you."

-KG: "Fine. Is there anything else?"

Yoh! He was really cold towards her, and in all the years she'd known him this was the first time him treating her like that.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I need you to give me the guns that the guys used to shoot those guys in that warehouse."

-KG: "Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "I can't tell you now but I'll tell you soon enough."

-KG: "Am I gonna get them back?"

-Sthandiwe: "Probably not."

-KG: "So you want me to hand over my guns to you, guns I'm not gonna get back, but you don't want to tell me why?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna tell you why, just not now."

-KG: "ST, I'm not gonna lose my guns. That's not gonna happen."

-Sthandiwe: "Since when did you become like this, KG? I lost my motorbike because of you but I let it go. I didn't even file an insurance claim because I didn't want to get into trouble. The insurance assessor was probably gonna find holes in my story and hey we both know that insurance fraud is a crime... So please, man, don't tell me about losing your guns. You can always get others."

-KG: (annoyed) "Fine, take them and leave."

She opened the wardrobe and came out with that duffelbag. He gave it to her then plopped down on the bed again. She opened it, they were all Glock 7's so she wasn't sure which 2 were used. So she ended up taking all 5 of them with that bag.

-Sthandiwe: "KG, I really am sorry for not honouring my promise. And I know that you like Palesa so I'll make sure that I fix this. Okay?"

He didn't respond. He just put his earphones back on. Sthandiwe decided it was better if she left. She left the Sprinter keys and walked to the road. She got there wamisa u7 [and made a "7" hand sign] for taxis to Jo'burg. In no time she got one and got in. She got to Jo'burg and took another taxi to Auckland Park.

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She got home around 21:00. Chris was not downstairs, he was probably in the bedroom. So she walked upstairs to the study. She put the bag in the cabinet and what she wanted to do next was to open that box from Alizwa and see its contents. But that share certificate on the shelf caught her eye. She took it and sat down on the chair behind the desk. She put the certificate on the desk and looked at it for a long moment, realising what she was about to lose. She finally snapped out of it and opened the drawer to take out that box, but Chris opened the door and walked in. She quickly closed the drawer and pretended as if she was still looking at the certificate.

-Chris: "I heard you get in. How's KG?"

-Sthandiwe: "He's gonna be fine."

Chris noticed the certificate.

-Chris: "Seller's remorse already?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm a Scientist, Chris. I never wanted this future, I never wanted that company, but a part of me still feels like I'm letting my father down."

-Chris: "I actually think he'd be proud of u. From what you've said, this Mike guy is the best choice."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, definitely better than Mason."

She sighed, all she could think about was finding out what was inside that box. She just wanted Chris out of her face so she could open it.

Chris wasn't about to walk out of that study. He sat on the desk.

-Chris: "You know what my parents said after my mom saw us yesterday?"

Okay, just seconds ago she wanted him out of her face but she had now changed her mind, she wanted to hear this.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I've been meaning to ask. What did they say?"

-Chris: "Apparently, they've known about us even before I went back to Cape Town."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "Oh?"

-Chris: "Yep. Apparently, they noticed how we behave around each other and how we look at each other when we're over there. So all those times I would be away from home, even though they never ask, they just knew that I'd be over here."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess parents are always smarter than us, hey."

-Chris: "I guess...And now they've asked me to invite you over for lunch tomorrow. Not as Palesa's friend this time but as my girlfriend."

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh...tomorrow, babe, I'm going to a funeral, remember? I told you."

-Chris: "Oh, yah, the funeral of that girl that died of leukemia in Diepkloof. I forgot."

-Sthandiwe: "And I cannot miss it...I spend hours with those children on Saturdays, Chris. I love them, they are like my own kids or my younger siblings now, so when another one of them has fallen I have to be there to send her off to her final resting place. Plus, her mother would appreciate it."

-Chris: "I understand, sthandwa sam. But we can always do late lunch after the funeral. Because my flight is only at 8 in the evening."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay then, we can do late lunch."

She wasn't really sure how she felt about that but she couldn't say no.

-Chris: "Great."

She kept quiet, thinking about something else, something that was saddening her. And Chris noticed.

-Chris: "Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "It always saddens me to see another child dying because of this decease, you know. I wish I can do more."

-Chris: "I know what you mean. But, sthandwa sam, you cannot do anything more. You give your time to spend with those children on Saturdays, to entertain them and give them hope. You donate to the House. You are a registered stem cell donor with the SABMR. And you live a humble life because you

donate half of your salary to the Sunflower Foundation every month. You are doing a lot already... And you never told me why you're doing all of that. Why are you so committed to the cause?"

-Sthandiwe: "My childhood friend died of leukemia at the age of 14. That hurt me so bad, that's why I make sure that now I donate to the cause so that other kids could get the treatment they need. But it's never enough."

-Chris: "Maybe I should also register as a donor with the SABMR."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, that could help."

-Chris: "You have a very good heart, babe, you know that?"

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "No, so keep saying it."

Chris laughed and came to stand behind her and whispered in her ear.

-Chris: "There's something I want to do more than that."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "And what's that?"

-Chris: "I'll show you."

He said that already starting to kiss her neck. Then he spinned the chair around so she could face him. He kissed her and she responded. His cold lips were doing magic on her, the kiss got heated, until she pulled back.

-Sthandiwe: "Let's take this to the bedroom."

She really wanted him and she hoped that this time he had condoms with him. They both rushed to the bedroom, Sthandiwe now completely forgotten about Alizwa's box.

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She opened the bedroom door with her back, as they were already kissing. She kept walking on reverse, their tongues down each other's throats, until they reached the bed. Chris threw her on it and got on top of her, still kissing. They were both hungry for each other and they quickly stripped each other naked.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, wait. Do you have condoms?"

-Chris: "I came prepared."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, wait here. I'll be right back."

She got up, rushed to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. She took out the tablets she got from uncle Vic and swallowed a couple. The pills were good and they were fast-working. And she wanted to numb the pain from her ribs and just enjoy making love to her man. And it sure was going to be a long night. Hello, he was leaving the following day so they had to satisfy each other. She went back

to the bedroom and Chris took out two boxes of condoms from the pocket of his jeans. Then they picked up where they'd left off. And it was amazing, Chris was amazing, he gave it to her like he never did before. He definitely sent her over the moon and beyond Pluto. Silently inside, she was like "Hell, baby, where have you been keeping this beast all this time." They slept after their fourth round, tired. They cuddled and dozed off until the morning.

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In the morning, Chris woke up first and Sthandiwe was still fast asleep. He woke her up.

-Chris: "Baby?"

Without even opening her eyes, she just rolled over, faced the other side and slept some more.

-Chris: (shaking her) "Baby, come on, you gotta wake up. You have a funeral to go to."

She just groaned, not wanting to wake up.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, please, I feel sick, I don't feel like waking up."

-Chris: "And the funeral? You said it yourself, you can't miss it."

She opened her eyes, quickly got out of bed and ran to the bathroom. She knelt in front of the toilet seat and threw up into the toilet. Even when she was done, she still remained in that position because she felt like she could throw up some more. Chris came in, concerned.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm fine. It's just the pills I'm taking. I told you that they make me sick."

-Chris: "And I told you to stop taking them and go see a doctor."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, I've been busy. I still haven't gotten time to do that."

She realised that she wasn't going to throw up again, so she got up and went to rinse her mouth in the sink.

-Chris: "Yesterday, you didn't eat any of the meat. In fact, after the toast you got up with your plate and went to the buffet table, looking nauseated. I saw you gulping down the juice, then you just leaned on that table and chatted with us standing over there. You only came back to our table after we had cleared it."

-Sthandiwe: "And your point is?"

-Chris: "Nothing. I'm just telling you my observations."

-Sthandiwe: "The pills make me feel nauseated and I have food aversions because of them. It's the side effects."

-Chris: "Give them to me now."

She didn't protest, she just went to the medicine cabinet and took them out, but not the ones she had gotten from uncle Vic. She handed them to Chris. And he flushed them down the toilet.

-Chris: "Now you won't take them anymore. Because I know that as long as you had them you wouldn't see the need to go see a doctor. But without them, the pain will force you to go."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'll go see a doctor tomorrow."

-Chris: "You promise?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, baby."

-Chris: "Good."

He gave her a baby kiss. Then they both brushed their teeth. That made her feel nauseated again. But she finished then drank some water. After that, she felt much better.

-Chris: "Now, let's get ready. You're going to that funeral."

They got in the shower together. He washed her back, she washed his, and they ended up kissing. And they both wanted repeat of the previous night. Chris quickly went to the bedroom to get a condom and they had hot, rough sex under the running shower water. Nothing beats that.

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After the shower they went back to the bedroom. And after lotioning herself, Sthandiwe put on a black body-hugging, below the knee dress; black stilletoes and a black small jacket. She tied her hair and applied minimal make-up. Chris was now dressed as well and he had made the bed. He asked her to come sit next to him on the bed, and she did.

-Chris: "There's something I want to talk to you about. And I know it's a sensitive matter but please don't think I'm judging you or anything like that. Because I'm not, I just want to help. I'd never judge you, sthandwa sam."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, you are freaking me out now. What is it?"

-Chris: "You said this to me before but apparently, you said it to Sihle too. Slightly differently but still the same thing. You told her that you weren't worthy of me. You said you're damaged and that you aren't good enough for me."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh my God Sihle. She told you that? Jeez! That was between me and her, she wasn't supposed to tell you that. What kind of a friend is she?"

-Chris: "No. Please don't attack her. She was only trying to help. She was only trying to be a good friend. Now we all know that something happened to you in the past which is why you're like this. Baby, you have trust issues and you end up pushing the man in your life away. You don't realise it but you do. Sthandwa sam, you don't love yourself because of what happened to you, and because of that you think no man would ever truly love you. When your man is out of sight, you just think the worst. That he's

cheating, because your head is telling you that they don't love you enough. I'm not saying all the man that cheated on you and ended up dumping you in the past were right but I think you probably also played a role in them doing that, with your trust issues."

All this time, Sthandiwe was just staring at him. When he stopped:

-Sthandiwe: (sarcastically) "Wow! Nice. This is great. I just got psychoanalysed by my own boyfriend so early in the morning. Nothing beats that."

-Chris: (calm) "You need to stop running, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "Running from what, Chris? I'm not running from anything?"

-Chris: "Yes, you are. When I went to see KG at his place that other day, he told me everything. You were raped when you were still a teen and you've been running away from that reality ever since. You never dealt with your past, sthandwa sam. And now it's ruining your life."

-Sthandiwe: "KG also blabbed about my life to you. This is getting better and better."

-Chris: "Why didn't you tell me yourself?"

-Sthandiwe: "I was going to but the time hadn't arrived yet. But it doesn't matter anymore 'cause the people I trusted have already told you behind my back."

-Chris: "But you are missing the point here. The point is, your friends want you to get help but they didn't know how to talk to you about this. So they asked me, your man, to. They did it because they love you, not because they wanted to embarrass you."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I don't like talking about what happened. I don't even want to think about it."

-Chris: "But, sthandwa sam, you are gonna have to talk about it. You're gonna have to deal with it. Because if you don't, it will only get worse. It will continue ruining your life. And your next man might not be like me and stick around. By saying that, I don't mean I plan to leave you, but I'm saying life happens and things that we can't control happen. So, if life happens and you find yourself with another man and do the same thing you did to me to him, he might not stick around and give you a second chance. And the cycle would continue and you would end up alone and hurt. That's why I suggest that you start seeing a therapist. Do it for yourself, sthandwa sam. Take your life back and be in control."

Sthandiwe was just staring at him.

-Chris: "MamTshawe, please. Please do this."

-Sthandiwe: "I know that I have to see a therapist. I just don't like what Sihle and KG did."

-Chris: "So, you're going to see the therapist?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. Days ago, I told you that I would."

-Chris: "Good. I'll Whatsapp you the details of the one I recommend."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you. And I'm sorry for making you feel like you were doing a bad thing by talking to me about this. I know you're doing all of this because you care...I love you."

-Chris: "I love YOU."

They kissed.

-Chris: "Should I call a cab for you?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'll take a general taxi."

-Chris: "You remember what happened the last time you were in Diepkloof and went to take a taxi?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know what happened. But it won't happen again. I'll be careful."

-Chris: "Fine. But I'll go pick you up after the funeral."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks."

She kissed him again and they walked out of the bedroom. But before walking out of the house, Chris grabbed his motorbike keys. Then they walked out, Sthandiwe locked up and opened the garage for Chris. He took out his bike, it was still there ever since he left it that day. He left it in the driveway and walked Sthandiwe to the taxi. After the taxi had left, he walked back, got on his bike and rode home.

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After the funeral, Chris went to pick Sthandiwe up with his father's car. He had parked two houses down the street and she walked over to him. He was sitting on the bonnet of the car, looking all cute. He was just wearing white three-quarter shorts, a powder blue polo shirt, white Nike slides and D&G sunglasses. The colours of his clothes complimented his skin tone. The guy is a yellow-bone and KG was right, he's not handsome he's pretty, but definitely not gayish. She got to him and they hugged and shared a kiss. He opened the car door for her and she got inside, then he went to get in his side too. He drove straight to Melrose, without even allowing Sthandiwe to go to her place and change, saying there was no time. They got to his house and his parents and Palesa were already waiting. It was awkward for Sthandiwe because none of her past boyfriends had ever introduced her to their parents. But Chris' parents loved her and they approved of their relationship, so eventually she eased up. They had that late lunch, chatting and laughing. And later, after 18:00, Chris had to leave so he said his goodbyes to his parents. Then Palesa and Sthandiwe drove him to the airport, in Palesa's car.

At the airport, after saying her goodbyes to his brother, Palesa walked away, giving Sthandiwe and her man some space. Sthandiwe was so emotional because he was leaving.

-Chris: "This is not a goodbye, but a see you soon, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll sure be with you this coming weekend. But still, it hurts to see you go."

-Chris: "I'll be moving back here soon, so you won't have to see me leave every now and then."

-Sthandiwe: "And I can't wait for that to happen...And please don't forget to go see an orthodontist when you get to Cape Town, okay?"

-Chris: "I won't. And don't forget to go see the therapist. And call me immediately when Reneé pulls one of her stunts again, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "I sure will. Safe travels."

-Chris: "I love you. Never forget that."

-Sthandiwe: "I won't. And I love you too."

They kissed, then he left. Sthandiwe went back to Palesa and Palesa drove her home. They agreed to meet again the following day after work, then she dropped her off.

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Before even going inside the house, she opened the garage and took out a bottle of paraffin. Then she got inside and went to get matches from a drawer in the kitchen. She took off her heels and got out of the back door to the backyard. She took out those bloodied clothes from the trash bin, Alizwa's clothes. It was Monday the following day, the day the City picks up the trash so she had to burn the clothes and put the ashes in the bin. She put them in a steel trash bin lid, poured the paraffin over and lit them up. As she watched them burn, she remembered the box. She got inside the house and went straight to the study. She took out the box and the card. She read it, "Music is a language. The greatest and most valuable language a person can speak. It allows us to share our thoughts and feelings. So, this is from me to you...Love and miss you, Alizwa."

She laughed. Okay, this is cheesy. She opened the box and inside was just a USB drive. She took it out and went to her bedroom. She plugged it in her laptop and saw what was inside. An audio file. She sat down in front of the bed, the laptop on her lap, and plugged earphones in. She listened to the file. Okay, it was an original love song by him for her. It sure was recorded in a studio because it had a very good audio quality. She listened to it until it ended, listening to the message in the lyrics. She found herself smiling. But the smile was quickly replaced by tears. She cried because this was a man she also loved, telling her through the song how much he still wanted her in his life. But she knew that she couldn't be with him. The guy was a liar, he had lied to her a number of times with a straight face, so trusting him again was hard for her. Plus, she didn't want to hurt Chris or provoke Reneé. She knew that being with him was just out of the question and that hurt her. She took her phone, wanting to call him, at least to tell him that she got the song, but she decided against it.

-Sthandiwe: "No, I can't do this to Chris."

She put the phone aside and stopped playing the song. Then she connected her laptop to the Wi-Fi, accessed KG's resume from her emails then forwarded it to Thumeka Bonani, the microbiologist. After that she put it on the nightstand, then changed into her pyjamas and got to bed. How was she going to fall asleep?

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How many of you want to see the lyrics of the song? I still know them even though I no longer have the song.

Insert #56

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As expected, Sthandiwe was unable to fall asleep, thinking about her complicated love life. In her head she knew that she couldn't be with Alizwa, she knew that Chris was the Mr Right she had been looking for all these years, and he had even taken the step of taking her to his parents, meaning he was really serious about their relationship. But her heart still wanted Alizwa. Yes, she loved Chris, but her heart wanted Alizwa more. But hey, the heart has a reputation of being a deceiver. So, following it was going to be a mistake. But how was she going to ignore the feelings she had for Alizwa? She stayed awake under those covers, her heart battling with her head.

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And as it turned out, she wasn't the only one battling to sleep. In Brooklyn, Pretoria, at Yandisa's poshy 3-bedroom apartment, Alizwa was still awake too. He was sitting in his wheelchair, alone in the lounge looking at the screen of his phone, his right arm in a sling. With the help of his sister, Yandisa, he had hired himself a private nurse. So, physically he was recovering well but emotionally he was a wreck. He missed Sthandiwe and moving on without her was difficult. By expressing himself in the song he had specially written for her, and rented a studio to record, he had hoped that she would at least call him and say something. But it seemed as if he was waiting for Jesus himself, Sthandiwe wasn't calling. He scrolled down on his contacts until he reached her number. He wanted to call her himself but wasn't sure if he should. He was still staring at the phone screen, debating if he should call or not, when Yandisa walked in wearing a satin night dress and a matching gown.

-Yandisa: "Haybo, bro, why are you still up? It's after eleven."

-Alizwa: "I can't sleep. And why are you here? Isn't your husband waiting for you in the bedroom?"

-Yandisa: "I was going to the kitchen to get some water when I noticed that the light was still on here. Are you okay?"

Alizwa didn't say anything, he just kept staring at Sthandiwe's name on the screen of his phone, as if it was her. Yandisa came to stand behind him, and she saw what he was staring at.

-Yandisa: "She still hasn't called yet?"

-Alizwa: "Nope. And I know that she got my gift yesterday but she still hasn't said anything."

-Yandisa: "Maybe it didn't mean as much to her as you thought it would."

Alizwa sighed.

-Alizwa: "Maybe... I worked hard composing that song, Yandi, and I gave Mel a hard time on the piano. I really thought Thandi would appreciate it and get the message I was sending across. I wanted to send the message in a more special way."

Mel was the nurse he had hired. And she helped him write the song on the piano, before he added the lyrics and recorded it in the studio. He had to ask her because he couldn't hit the left keys, his left arm still hurt.

-Yandisa: "Maybe she doesn't want anything to do with you. She probably didn't even listen to the song. She probably threw it away and forgot about it. So protect your heart, bro, by doing the same. Forget about her."

-Alizwa: "But how do I do that, Yandi? I already tried but I can't. I love her... Yes, she's younger than me. Eight years younger, to be exact. But she's so mature, she's strong and independent. And I like that about her...I don't remember the last time I felt this way about a woman. She makes me lose my mind. She makes me feel and act like a teenager again. I'm in love with her, Yandi. I can't just forget about her."

-Yandisa: "So the feelings you pretended to have for her grew to be true. That's fucked up, hey."

-Alizwa: "Yeah, I know...In the short space of time I've been with her, I can tell you this much, that woman understands me better than my ex-wife ever did, Yandi. In fact, we have a lot in common. We like the same things, we have the same level of education, we do the same job, we both know the pain of losing both parents, and we understand the challenges of growing up as the only child. She understands me and I understand her. When we are together, our conversations never get boring."

Yandisa just looked at him with sad eyes. She wanted him to spare himself more pain by letting Sthandiwe go. But the way he was talking about her, with a smile on his face, the glitter in his eyes, she could see that he truly loved her and he wasn't about to let her go. He was going to get hurt and there was nothing she could do about it. He put the phone aside and took out his vaporiser (e-cigarette) and started puffing.

-Yandisa: "Come on, bro, why do you still have that? I thought you stopped smoking. Our father died of lung cancer, Al."

-Alizwa: "Smoking helps me deal with stress. It relaxes me. Please, let me have this one, sis'...And it's less toxic than a real cigarette."

-Yandisa: "There's no enough scientific evidence to support that. But fine, do what you gotta do."

She patted him on his shoulder.

-Yandisa: "This whole thing with Thandi is gonna sort itself out eventually. You're gonna be fine. But please don't call her."

Then she left him. And he continued taking a drag after another.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe, woke up feeling sick and exhausted. She didn't feel like getting out of bed or even going to work. But she had to. So, she got out of bed and made it. Then she went to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Then took some peppermint candies from the medicine cabinet to help with the nausea. But she still took the pills she got from uncle Vic because she was feeling some pain on her ribs and on the arm where the bullet grazed her. Then she went back to the bedroom and changed into leggings and a sports bra. Thereafter, she took her phone and her laptop and transferred Alizwa's song to the phone via Bluetooth. Then she strapped the phone on her forearm, put earphones on and left the bedroom to the home gym. She climbed on the treadmill and got it rolling at a slow pace, so basically she was fast-walking, not running. But that was better than not exercising at all. She hated not being able to have her long morning jogs because of the stupid ribs. As she continued on the treadmill, she was listening to Alizwa's piano song, on repeat. It was called "Cloudy".

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I'm keeping my distance, but it hurts

You pushed me away, and that hurt

But I don't blame you, know you're hurtin'

Now sitting here nothing seems right

Can't we go back to the way we were?

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I think about you everyday

I see your face in everyone

I smell your scent in everything

I hear your voice everywhere

Baby, without you there's no blue sky

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It's just cloudy, cloudy, cloudy

Being without you is a torture

I'm unable to hold you

And that hurts, hurts, hurts

Baby, without you my world's cloudy

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I broke your heart, and that hurt

Now I'm missing you, and it hurts

But I know it's true, you're also hurtin'

I know I fucked up a good thing but

Can't we go back to the way we were?

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Trust me I'm hurtin' everyday

Like bein' laughed at by everyone

I feel like dropping everything

Go away with you, anywhere

Baby, without you there's no blue sky

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It's just cloudy, cloudy, cloudy

Being without you is a torture

I'm unable to hold you

And that hurts, hurts, hurts

Baby, without you my world's cloudy

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I wish I could go back

Change errthing I did

But I can't do that

All I can do is apologise

Baby, please forgive me

I need you in my life because,

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It's just cloudy, cloudy, cloudy

Being without you is a torture

I'm unable to hold you

And that hurts, hurts, hurts

Baby, without you my world is cloudy

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Can't we go back to the way we were?

Baby, without you there's no love, love

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Chorus again.

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She spent 30 minutes on that treadmill, deep in thought, listening to the song. And the more she listened to it, the more she got confused as to what she should do. Alizwa knew what she liked and now he was using it to his advantage. It was a good pop song, he showcased his piano skills very well and for someone who said he sucked in vocals he sounded pretty amazing. Sthandiwe finally stopped the treadmill and got off. She took the earphones off and went back to the bedroom, then to the bathroom. She took her clothes off, put them in a laundry basket and got in the shower. After that quick shower, she got dressed and got ready for work. Then she took her bags, went to the study, took some documents and put them in her bag. After that she went to the kitchen, she was super hungry. She had 8 slices of bread with lots and lots of peanut butter and honey, and drank some juice, she didn't want anything else. Then she called a cab and it took her to campus.

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When she got to her office, Prof Jansen was already waiting for her at the door. She greeted, unlocked the door and they both walked inside. Prof Jansen noticed the test scripts that were scattered on the floor, she had left them like that on Friday. She put her bags on the desk and ignored the scripts.

-Sthandiwe: "What can I help you with, Prof?"

-Prof Jansen: "What's going on with you, Blie? You don't show up to your students practical sessions, you leave the office early everyday and the students are complaining about that because when they want to consult you're never here, you don't dress like a doctor, and now I see the students test scripts on the floor. What's going on with you?"

Everything he was saying just caused a quake of anger somewhere inside her. And it showed in the way she responded to him, her superior, her HOD.

-Sthandiwe: "What do you want from me, mlungu [white man]? Don't I go to lectures? Don't I teach my students? Don't they write their tests on schedule? What more do you want from me? I'm going through a lot already so, hayi maan, hayi phuma kum. [No, man, no, leave me alone.]"

She was angry and English just went out the window. By the time she finished talking she was crying. She had no control over her emotions. And she just ran out of the office, leaving Prof Jansen shocked, mouth agape. She ran to the restroom and into one of the toilets. She locked the door, sat on the toilet seat and cried some more.

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After a great deal of crying, she wiped her tears and walked out of the toilet and went to stand in front of a mirror. Luckily, she had no make-up on otherwise she was going to be a mess. She cleaned her face with the paper towel then walked out. She went to Xolisa's office and just walked in without even knocking. Xolisa was busy with his research paper on his laptop but when he heard the door open, he stopped and looked up.

-Xolisa: "We're back to not knocking again I see."

-Sthandiwe: "Can you believe Jansen? It's still early in the morning but he had a nerve to go to my office and complain about how I do my work."

She told him about what had transpired between her and Prof Jansen.

-Xolisa: "Come on, Thandi, he had a right to say that. When he's not satisfied with the way you do your job, he has a right to say something. He's the head of this department."

Sthandiwe laughed sarcastically.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh wow, to think I thought you were my friend. Why are you taking his side?"

-Xolisa: "I'm not taking any side, I'm just telling you that you were wrong. And you made it worse by speaking to him the way you did. So, I suggest you go to his office right now and apologise before he takes this a step further."

-Sthandiwe: "Me, apologise? I ain't doing that...Look, just give me that surveillance footage you said you'd give to me today."

Xolisa just sighed and took the DVD and the tape he got from Booyens out of his drawer and handed them to her.

-Sthandiwe: "You didn't make any copies, right?"

-Xolisa: "Nope."

She walked out without even thanking him. Xolisa just shook his head and continued with what he was doing.

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Sthandiwe got to her office and put the tape and the DVD in her handbag then went to conduct all her three lectures. By the time she was done, she was realising that she was wrong by talking to Prof Jansen the way she did. She herself didn't even understand why she got so angry and emotional and ended up talking to him like that. She decided to go to his office and apologise. She told him that it was caused by the stress she was under because of everything that was going on in her life, then she apologised over and over again. And because Prof Jansen always had a soft spot for her, he understood and let it go but told her to change her ways. She thanked him and went back to her office. And instead of sitting down and mark the test scripts. She just put them in a box and took the box together with her bags and left her office, exactly what Prof Jansen said she shouldn't do. She called a cab and it took her to meet her lawyer. She got the written contract which clearly indicated that she was selling her shares, and the share transfer forms. Then she went to the board meeting. She announced to the board that she was selling her shares to uncle Mike. And they both signed the forms and had them witnessed. She left her original share certificate. And it all became so real, she had ceded her rights to the shares in the company that was started by her father. She still had to talk to the broker though, who was going to make sure that the shares get moved to Mike Wells and the money gets moved to her account. Mike was going to be registered as the majority shareholder in the company's share register and be issued a new share certificate. And Sthandiwe was out. That hurt but it was something she had to do. After meeting with the broker, the cab took her to Jo'burg. When she got there it was around 15:45 and the person she was going to meet up with, Palesa, was knocking off from the bank. She wanted to meet her so they could go together to the Brackendowns Police Station to finish the police report, because the police gave her a run-around when she went there alone, saying they needed the person who was driving her car when it had the accident present. She was scared that she was going to be given hell, by both the police and her insurance company, because it was now a week since the accident happened. But they went anyway.

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On the way.

-Sthandiwe: "So what does Siya say about you staying with your parents again? I'm sure he's not pleased."

-Palesa: "He can go to hell for all I care."

-Sthandiwe: "Haybo, why are you talking like that now?"

-Palesa: (focused on the road) "Him and I are no longer together."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "Huh?"

-Palesa: "Sihle doesn't know about this either. But shit started that day I was busy trying to get help to find you. As you know, he kept calling asking me to come home. But how was I gonna go home not knowing where my friend was? So I just got annoyed, understandably so, and I told him off. And when I got to my apartment later that night, I found him waiting for me, ready to fry my ass. We got into a heated argument, and he ended up saying he'd been observing my behaviour all these years and I never listen to him, I take him for granted, and I don't respect him, blah blah blah. And that he's the man in this relationship and he's not gonna be disrespected by me. After that he took all of his things that were in my apartment and left. The following night I went to his apartment, wanting to talk and fix things, but he wasn't interested. Even when I was in hospital he didn't visit me even once."

-Sthandiwe: "Haybo, just like that?"

-Palesa: "Yep."

-Sthandiwe: "Yoh, I'm sorry, chomi."

-Palesa: "Don't be, 'cause I'm not. I'm no man's possession, no man has a right to tell me what to do and what not to do, or tell me to choose between him and my friends. Hell, who does he think he is?"

-Sthandiwe: "But you loved that man, chomi. Sure you can't let your relationship end just like that."

-Palesa: "Yeah, I loved him, still do, but that doesn't change anything. He's the one who walked out on me, not the other way around. And I no longer care, 'cause he clearly has someone else and he was just looking for a reason to dump me. That's the only explanation I have for his behaviour."

-Sthandiwe: "Yoh. But you, guys, were good together. And your relationship was solid."

-Palesa: "No relationship is solid, sweetie. Even marriages break...Clearly, as the Tight Three we can't all be happy at the same time. You're now happy with Chris and my relationship just fell apart."

That got Sthandiwe thinking. Was she really happy? She just let out a sigh, a lot happening in her head.

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They got to the police station and finished the report. Then Sthandiwe called her insurance company and told them that she had gotten the full police report. Because the day she came to do it, she called them to let them know about the accident and they told her what documents she had to send through. But when she told them that she didn't have a police report, they told her that they would not validate her claim without it. And they just sent a tow truck (she had that coverage on her policy) to tow the car from the police station to a repair shop they recommended. So when she got the report she called them again and they told her to fax it to them together with the other supporting documents they had asked her to send through, then they would appoint an assessor to her. And the assessor was going to meet up with her the following day to discuss her claim. So after they left the police station they looked for an internet cafe, they found it and she faxed the police report together with the other supporting documents they had requested, the documents she had taken from the study in the morning. From there, she asked Palesa to drive her to Brackenhurst Square Shopping Centre in Brackenhurst. She was

craving KFC hot wings. She bought them and they drove home. Palesa dropped her off at the entrance and left because there was somewhere she had to go with her mother.

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Sthandiwe walked inside the house with her bags, the box with test scripts and the hot wings. She went to sit on the high chairs in the kitchen and enjoyed her hot wings. Mmh eating them felt like heaven. She devoured them quickly and when they were finished she wanted more. But she couldn't go get more, she had scripts to mark. So she took her things and went upstairs to the study. She buried herself in the marking, avoiding to think about Alizwa. As if he knew that she didn't want to think about him, he called. But she ignored the call and continued with what she was doing. He didn't give up, he kept calling. But she just put the phone on silent and put it far away from her. She finished marking around 21:30 and went to the bathroom to take a quick shower. It was only after that shower that she checked her phone. She had 6 missed calls from Alizwa and 2 from Chris. She put on her PJs and got to bed. Then returned Chris' call. They talked and talked for hours, laughing as if they were together in the same bed. Alizwa kept calling but she ignored him and kept talking with her man. They ended the call after 00:00 as they were now both feeling sleepy. Alizwa just had to sleep with a broken heart once more, Sthandiwe wasn't giving him the time of day (or night for that matter).

Insert #58

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In the morning, Sthandiwe went to work. And the good thing was that she didn't have to use a cab anymore, KG's car was of great help. She got to work and went to her only lecture of the day, at 8:00. Then she got back to her office and typed a letter that was gonna bring about a lot of change in her life. Was it going to be a good change or the complete opposite? She didn't know, but it was something she felt she had to do.

The following day, on a Thursday, her third class was writing a test, but she didn't have enough time to set the question paper. So, after typing the letter, she edited a paper that was written the previous year. And she finished pretty quickly then printed it together with the letter she had just typed. Then she went to collect the printouts from the print room. On her way back to her office she passed by Prof Jansen's office, the HOD. She knocked and he told her to come in.

-Sthandiwe: "Morning, Prof."

-Prof Jansen: "Blie. How are you today? Are things getting better in your private life?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm fine, Prof. I just wanted to let you know that I'm resigning. I just printed out my letter of resignation and I'm gonna take it to the HR department today... I'm gonna stay until the end of the year exams are done, then pack all my stuff and leave."

That was terrible news to Prof Jansen. He valued her and her work. She was an asset to the department, a fresh blood. And she was dedicated to her work, well up until all the drama with Reneé came about and it fucked up with her concentration and dedication.

-Prof Jansen: (sad) "But why, Blie? Is it because of what happened on Monday?"

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "No, Prof. Of course not."

-Prof Jansen: "Then what is it? You've found a job in the private sector? What's next for you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nope, no job. And I don't know what I'm gonna do next. But what I know is, I'm leaving Jo'burg. I need to be as far away from this place as possible. Personal reasons."

-Prof Jansen: "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, sorry, Prof. My mind's already made up. But I'm grateful to you for everything you've done for me over the years. You're the one who encouraged me to apply for this post. Because you saw something in me. And that boosted my confidence. I got to trust myself more and I got to believe in my abilities. And, Prof, you became more than just my HOD and research mentor, you also became a life advisor and a father figure to me. So, thank you, Prof."

He looked at her with sad eyes.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't be sad, I'm not leaving tomorrow. I'm still gonna be around for a couple of months."

He got up and shook her hand.

-Prof Jansen: "It's been an honour working with a dedicated young woman like you."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "It's been an honour working with YOU, Prof."

-Prof Jansen: "I'm gonna let the other staff members know."

She nodded then left.

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She went back to her office and put the papers on her desk. Then she emailed the soft copy of the letter to the HR department then took the hard copy and put it in an envelope that she got from the stationery on her shelf. After that, she took her bags and left the office with the letter. She went to Xolisa's office and knocked.

-Xolisa: "Come in."

She came in and found him sitting at his desk reading some hardcopy book. He looked up and:

-Xolisa: "Oh, it's you, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, be glad I knocked."

-Xolisa: (smiling) "I am. Trust me. It shows that your manners are improving. Anyway, what's up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing's up, everything's down."

-Xolisa: "What do you mean?"

She went to sit on a chair in front of his desk.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't want you to hear this from someone else around this department, I want you to hear it from me. I'm resigning, XO. And you're the first person to know about it, well after Jansen."

-Xolisa: (shocked) "Whoa! Are you serious?"

-Sthandiwe: "As a heart attack."

-Xolisa: "But why? And how long have you thought about it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not long, just last night. I'm leaving Jo'burg, XO. A lot of bad sh*t has happened to me here. So I want to go and start afresh somewhere else. New place, new memories."

-Xolisa: "I can't say I'm pleased but if it's what you want then I'll support you...So where to? Cape Town?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, Cape Town. With Chris."

-Xolisa: "Lucky guy. I'm just glad you are done with that Alizwa guy. I never liked him."

-Sthandiwe: "And I thought you were just jealous when you first told me that there was something not right about him. Now I wish I had listened to you before I got too deep."

-Xolisa: "Hey, don't be too hard on yourself, okay? You had a reason to be skeptical. You thought I still wanted you for myself. But trust me, I got over that a long time ago. Now I just care about you as a friend."

-Sthandiwe: "Trust me, I know that now."

-Xolisa: "So when are you leaving? And what are you gonna do in Cape Town? I mean job-wise."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna leave at the end of this semester. And I don't know what I'm gonna do once I get there but I'll figure something out."

-Xolisa: "And it's not like you are in desperate need of money anyway. You can survive just fine without a job, trust-fund-baby. Not to mention that you're selling your father's company, and that's millions."

-Sthandiwe: "But I'll still need something to do, XO. It's called being responsible. So, I'll figure something out... Anyway, are you ready to go there this weekend?"

-Xolisa: "Cape Town? Oh, hell yes. I can't wait."

-Sthandiwe: "That makes the two of us...But for now let me love and leave you, buddy. I have a lot to do."

-Xolisa: "You sure are a busy being."

She just smiled and left. She went to leave the resignation letter at the HR department then went to meet up with her therapist. Her appointment was at 10:30.

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The therapist's office was a few minutes drive from campus so at least she got there 5 minutes before her appointment time. She talked to the assistant at the front desk, then the assistant told her to go sit on one of the couches in the waiting area. In a minute the therapist was done with the session she was doing when Sthandiwe arrived. She walked the patient out and called Sthandiwe. They stepped inside her office. She was a nice lady, maybe 31. But she had been practising for years. And apparently she did her Psychology undergrad degree with Chris, and they both graduated 8 years earlier. Then went their separate ways for their postgraduate studies.

-The Therapist: "So Chris told me to expect you before you even called this office."

-Sthandiwe: "I see...I've never done something like this before so I'm kinda nervous."

-The Therapist: "Don't be. And remember, whatever we talk about or happens in this room will stay in this room. No one would hear about it, not even Chris."

-Sthandiwe: "I understand."

-The Therapist: "So speak freely. Therapy works but it only works if you open up and hold nothing back. Freud called it the "talking cure". A chimney sweep of emotions."

So they began. And in that 1 hour of the session, Sthandiwe was already seeing things clearly. She talked about what was happening in her life, with Cris and Alizwa. And some more about what happened in the past. She still had to come for more sessions but she walked out of there with a clear head, knowing very well that the decision she had made the previous night was the best one. She left the office and went to see her family doctor, Dr Mashinini, for her ribs. Dr Mashinini was a female doctor in her late 40s. She told her about the NSAIDs she had been taking and that they were making her feel sick. Mashinini told her that it happens. And after confirming that the ribs were really not broken, the doctor prescribed other anti-inflammatories for her. She left and passed by the pharmacy to get them, then called Sihle. Sihle told her to drive to her house and that she had something for her.

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So she drove to Rosebank and found Sihle waiting for her. She filled her in on what she had found about Ethan, Reneé's brother. Then she gave her the file containing everything she had collected over 4 days. She wanted to continue digging but Sthandiwe told her that what she had was enough.

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "I see you have a problem with the current century, chomi. You like paper."

She said that referring to the file she had given to her.

-Sihle: "Hey, call me whatever you want but I don't ever want to send sensitive information over the internet. I don't trust it."

-Sthandiwe: "Riiiiight. I get you. Anyway, are you ready for Cape Town this weekend?"

-Sihle: "You don't even need to ask. I can't wait for the beach. I'm tired of this Jo'burg heat. And Muzi is fine with it."

-Sthandiwe: "You have a very understanding husband, hey. I wish I could get a husband like that too someday."

-Sihle: "And it's gonna happen sooner than you think, sweetie."

She said that as if she knew something Sthandiwe didn't. But Sthandiwe didn't read too much into it.

-Sthandiwe: "You think? Nah, I doubt it...Anyway, I have something else I wanna tell you."

She told her about the resignation and her leaving Jo'burg. Sihle wasn't too thrilled about her friend moving to another city but she understood why she wanted to do it, and she told her that she supports her decision. They hugged and Sthandiwe left to meet with Thumeka Bonani at her office, as per their agreement.

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She got to Randburg, just after 14:00. She went to Thumeka's office and found her rather very friendly than the day she last saw her. She hugged her and offered her something to drink.

-Thumeka: "I got the resume. And you were right, Kagiso is perfect for this job. So, this is his appointment letter and everything he'd need to know about the job he's gonna be doing for us."

She said that handing Sthandiwe an A4 envelope.

-Thumeka: "He'll start on Monday. Not the Monday of next week but the week after that."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Thank you, sis' Thumeka. You don't know how much this means to me."

-Thumeka: "Your father also helped me. You were right, a favour deserves another."

-Sthandiwe: "But still, thank you...And oh, there's another favour I want to ask you."

-Thumeka: "Feel free. What is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "I need 600mg of arsenic. I cannot just go and buy that but you on the other hand, you can get it for me. No questions asked."

-Thumeka: "Arsenic? What are you gonna do with that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Trust me, the less you know the better."

-Thumeka: "But Thandi, I can't..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "A favour deserves another, right? And my father did a lot of those for you. (getting to her feet) I'll be here to collect tomorrow."

And with that, she walked to the door with the envelope. And she was out, leaving Thumeka not sure if she should get her what she wanted.

She got to her car and drove off to Pretoria to see Alizwa.

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She got to the apartment and Mel, the nurse, let her in, then went to get Alizwa. Yandisa and her husband were still not back from work, it was just the two of them in the apartment. A moment later, Alizwa wheeled into the lounge already flashing that beautiful smile of his that always made Sthandiwe feel weak on her knees. But not that day, it had no effect on her at all. Mel decided to give them some space and remained in her bedroom.

-Alizwa: "Hey. You look beautiful."

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you."

She knew that the compliment was just his icebreaker. She was just wearing jeans, a T-shirt, sneakers and a cap on her head. Nothing beautiful there.

-Alizwa: "Would you like something to drink?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'm fine, thanks."

She sat down on the couch opposite him.

-Sthandiwe: "So how have you been? Recovering well?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah, I've been good. Mel is a great nurse. But I've been missing you."

-Sthandiwe: "About that, I..."

-Alizwa: (interrupting) "Please, let me go first...Thandi, I know that I hurt you. I know that I lied to you a number of times. And I'm sorry. But, thando lwam, I never lied when I said I love you. And trust me, being with you knowing very well that I was keeping secrets from you hurt me more than anything. And knowing that when you find out you would dump me was the worst feeling. The thought of losing you

kept me awake at night. But I had to risk it and confess to everything. I couldn't lie or keep secrets to you anymore and..."

She didn't let him finish. He was just angering her because he was talking bullsh*t again.

-Sthandiwe: "Everything? You confessed to everything? Really?"

-Alizwa: "Okay, not to everything but almost everything... I know I didn't tell you about Penny. You got to find out about that..."

-Sthandiwe: "From Ted. Ted is the one who told me about Penny. But I guess he forgot to tell me that you told him to plant a tracker on my car, or that that's how he got to know my whereabouts every time he wanted to follow me around, invading my privacy. And when you were "confessing" you didn't mention it either."

-Alizwa: (calm as always) "I didn't tell Ted to plant that tracker, it was his idea. Said that's how he operates. Well operated, 'cause now he's dead. I didn't authorise it, I just knew about it."

-Sthandiwe: "Same difference. So, what else did y'all plant? Bugs in my house? What? Am I even safe in my house, Alizwa?"

He didn't answer, he just looked down.

-Sthandiwe: "What, there are bugs in my house, Alizwa? Oh God, I don't believe this."

-Alizwa: "No, Thandi, there are no bugs in your house. But are you safe there? The answer is: probably not. (he paused, resenting what he was about to say) I...I copied your front door key the first day I was in your house alone. And the copy is with Reneé. That's why that other day I told you to stop not locking the burglar gate in the porch. She doesn't have its key."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked and angry at the same time) "Wow. What are you, really? You copied my key, gave it to your pyscho wife and didn't see the need to tell me about it when you were supposedly confessing? Why? Why did you do that?"

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry. I really am. But you already know why I had to do it. And I didn't tell you about it because it didn't matter, without that Trellidor key the front door key is useless. And she hasn't used it, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Are you even listening to yourself, Alizwa? She hasn't used it? How am I supposed to know that? I don't lock that burglar gate everyday, sometimes I don't lock it. And if she hasn't used the key yet, she could probably use it today, tomorrow or the next day. Point is, I'm not safe in my own house because of you. Damn you, Alizwa."

-Alizwa: "Thandi, I'm sorry. I didn't..."

-Sthandiwe: "Save it. You just made what I came here for easy for me."

-Alizwa: "What do you mean? What are you here for?"

-Sthandiwe: "I want you to give me access to your old house. Well, Reneé's house. And now you don't have an option to say no, you gave her access to my house, and now I want you to give me access to hers. It's that simple."

-Alizwa: "May I at least ask why?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, you may not."

-Alizwa: "This thing with Reneé is getting way too far, don't you think? Listen, why don't we just leave everything behind and go away together, anywhere, it doesn't matter. Away from Reneé, away from everything, just the two of us. That's what I said in the song I sent you, and I meant it. I love you, Thandi, and I know that you love me too. So let's do this."

-Sthandiwe: "That takes me to the second reason why I wanted to talk to you today. I love you, Al, I won't deny that. But the fact that I love you and you also claim to love me, doesn't mean we're meant to be together. It's just feelings and they will go away. I got your song, I listened to it, and I came here to tell you to stop sending me anything, just keep your distance and stop your fantasies about us. Because, Alizwa, there is no us, there never was and there never will be. I'm not going anywhere with you, I'm not leaving Chris. You know why? Because he never did and he never would do any of the sh*t you did to me. When he says he loves me, he actually means it...Now that that's out of the way, please tell me how to get into Reneé's house and give me the code to her safe in the house."

He kept quiet, just staring at her, visibly hurt. Then after sometime:

-Alizwa: "Fine, I'll get you what you want. But please be careful. I don't want you to get hurt in any way. And you better hope she hasn't changed the locks or any of the codes."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry yourself about any of that. Let me do the worrying."

He just wheeled out of the lounge and moments later he came back with the keys to Reneé's house with the gate remote, and the code to the safe written on a piece of paper. He told her where the safe was in the house then handed everything to her.

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you. Now, I gotta go."

She got up to leave but Alizwa also got up, stood on one leg and grabbed her arm with his left hand. By reflex, Sthandiwe quickly turned around to hold him so he wouldn't fall. They were now standing so close to each other, Alizwa's hand in hers, and her other hand around his waist. They stood like that for a moment too long, keeping eye contact and the moment quickly felt like it could be a kiss, but Sthandiwe just helped him sit back down on his wheelchair.

-Sthandiwe: "You're gonna hurt yourself."

-Alizwa: "You were right, I'm a liar. I also lied when I said I was cool with you being with Chris. Truth is, I wasn't. I'll never be cool with that and I'll never be over you, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "It really doesn't matter. Goodbye, Alizwa."

She walked to the door, but before she walked out, Alizwa said something.

-Alizwa: "Thandi, are you...?"

He stopped himself. He was going to ask if she was pregnant, but decided against it.

Dangerous Love

Insert #59

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Sthandiwe stopped and turned to look at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Am I what?"

He discarded what he wanted to ask and only asked:

-Alizwa: "Are you sure about whatever you want to do in Reneé's house?"

-Sthandiwe: "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

-Alizwa: "There are several surveillance cameras in that yard, Thandi. So, you'll need more than just the gate and house keys to get in safely. Trust me, you do not wanna find yourself starring in a crime movie for the cops to watch."

-Sthandiwe: "And you think I haven't thought of that?"

-Alizwa: "Let me help you with it."

-Sthandiwe: "Why would you want to help me?"

-Alizwa: "Because I still care for you, deeply. And I do not wanna see you in trouble."

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "Says a guy that still has his ex-wife's house keys. Thanks, but no thanks. I'll be just fine."

-Alizwa: "Please, come back here and sit down."

-Sthandiwe: "Why?"

-Alizwa: "Please."

She did. She went to sit down on the couch facing him again.

-Sthandiwe: "So?"

He wheeled closer to her and held her hand.

-Alizwa: "I'm so lost without you, babe. I'm losing my mind here. Can't you see? I miss you so much, Thandi, it hurts. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do to make things right. I don't know how to show you that I'm sorry and I'm..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "Stop, stop, stop, please... Why are you doing this? Why do you want us to go around in circles, Al? We already talked about this. I've told you that we can never be. You know, Al, you're like an onion, you have layers and each layer that gets peeled off makes me cry. I don't know you, I don't know who or what you are. All I see in front of me is a man with a lot of secrets and lies. You didn't tell me about Penny, you didn't tell me about you stealing my share certificate, the tracker under my car, or you copying my key. Each day is a new lie and secret with you. So no, there's nothing you can do to make things right between us. But come to think of it, there is something you can do to help me with Reneé. Please make sure that she's not home when I go to her house."

Alizwa looked at her for a long beat, with sad eyes. Then:

-Alizwa: "When are you going there?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll call you and tell you...And does she have guards there now?"

-Alizwa: "I believe so."

-Sthandiwe: "Make sure she loses them that day. I don't care how you do it but please, make it happen."

-Alizwa: "Okay. I'll help you with all of that."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. I really have to go now."

She got up and walked out. Alizwa buried his face in his hands and let out a deep sigh. If he was not a man he would have cried because seeing her walk away like that hurt, it hurt like hell.

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Not long after Sthandiwe left, Yandisa got home. She found Alizwa in the lounge, blankly staring at the TV.

-Yandisa: "Hey, bro."

Alizwa didn't respond, his mind a million miles away, deep in thought.

-Yandisa: "Al? Are you okay?"

She went to stand before him and clicked her fingers in front of his face. He snapped out of it.

-Alizwa: "Hey, you're back."

-Yandisa: "Are you okay?"

-Alizwa: "Thandi was just here."

-Yandisa: "And judging from the look on your face, she wasn't a bearer of good news. Am I right?"

-Alizwa: "She's pregnant, Yandi."

-Yandisa: "She is? For the other guy?"

-Alizwa: "No, that's my baby. I know it."

-Yandisa: (smiling) "Really? Then you should be happy, bro. You're gonna be a father again. That's good news."

But Alizwa wasn't smiling.

-Yandisa: "Or not?"

-Alizwa: "She didn't tell me herself that she's pregnant. And she still doesn't want anything to do with me."

-Yandisa: "Okay, now I'm confused. If she didn't tell you that she's pregnant, then who did?"

-Alizwa: "No one. I saw it myself. The minute I wheeled into this room and saw her, I noticed something different about her. Then when she came closer, I looked at her and touched her, I just knew then and there what was different about her - now she's carrying my child."

-Yandisa: "You knew that just by looking at her? How? And did you ask her about it?"

-Alizwa: "Let's just say I have a knack for knowing these things. Even when Reneé was pregnant, I got to know it before she did...And no, I didn't ask Sthandiwe about it."

-Yandisa: "So, you're just gonna leave it like that? You're gonna let her exclude you in your baby's life? You lost your son three years ago because of her father, Al. And you lived with your wife knowing that she couldn't conceive again, knowing that you would never have another child again. But now God has given you another chance to be a father, you can't let Thandi take that away from you."

-Alizwa: (stern voice) "Never ever talk about my son again, Yandi. Hear me? And don't talk as if it was Thandi's fault. It was her father's, not hers. But I sure won't let her raise my child with Chris."

And with that he wheeled out of the lounge.

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Sthandiwe got home around 19:00 and as she parked in the driveway she saw KG sitting in the front porch waiting for her. She got out of the car and walked to him with her head down and hands tucked in the front pockets of her jeans - more like just the four fingers of each hand.

-KG: "You must be exhausted. I know that's how you walk when you are."

She just extended her hand for their unique handshake.

-Sthandiwe: "Sure, gazi. Whassup?"

-KG: "Nothing much. You?"

He asked looking at her, her head cap pulled down to just above her eyes.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. Why are you looking at me like that?"

-KG: "You can be such a boy sometimes. But a pretty boy, that's for sure."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess that's why you love me so much. So, how long have you been sitting here?"

-KG: "Not long. I was just about to call you when you drove in."

-Sthandiwe: "Is there something wrong?"

-KG: "Nope, just came to see you. Where are you coming from?"

-Sthandiwe: "Pretoria. Went to see Alizwa."

-KG: "What, you went to see that guy? Why would you do that, ST?"

-Sthandiwe: "Ey, spare me the lecture, BB."

-KG: "BB?"

-Sthandiwe: "You're acting like my father right now, so I might as well call you by his name."

KG just chuckled and shook his head. Sthandiwe opened the door and they both walked inside.

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She went straight to the kitchen and got some ice out of the icemaker pouring it in a glass. Then she sat on one of the high chairs, and started dipping her fingers in the glass, taking ice out and throwing it in her mouth. KG came and sat on the counter. He looked at the weird thing she was doing but didn't ask.

-KG: "So what did you want from Alizwa? You still want to be with him?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I don't want to be with him. But like I said to you the other day, I still have feelings for him. And he knows it. Remember that gift he sent me?"

KG nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "Well, it was a song that he specially wrote for me. The guy knows that I still like him and he also knows what I like and now he's using it to his advantage. He's confusing me and he's doing it on purpose. And if I didn't put a stop to it, he was gonna continue with his gestures to confuse me. So, one of the reasons I went to see him was to tell him to stop and accept that we can never be."

-KG: "And you think he's gon' do that? Sounds like you don't trust yourself. You don't trust that you won't go back to him if he continues to charm your brains off."

-Sthandiwe: "Brains have got nothing to do with this, KG. It's the heart and I wouldn't be the first person to be deceived by it and end up making wrong decisions...But don't worry, I'm not going back to him. The feelings I have for him will fade away in time. Not every person you fall for is the person you're meant to be with. I know that Alizwa is not the guy for me, Chris is."

-KG: "Now you're talking."

-Sthandiwe: "And you know what else I got from that song he sent? I got to hear how deeply he cares for me. Not from what he sang but from how he sang it. And I used that to my advantage. That was me taking a page from his book. I wanted access to Reneé's house and I knew he would give me the keys. He couldn't say no, he loves me."

-KG: "So you're using him?"

-Sthandiwe: "He used me too. I'm only returning the favour."

With that she got up and made her way to the lounge.

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She snuggled on the couch with her glass of ice. KG went to sit next to her.

-KG: "So, what do you want in Reneé's house?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll tell you but all in good time, bro."

-KG: "As long as you're gonna stay away from Alizwa, I'm happy...Anyway, what did Palesa say about you giving me her number?"

-Sthandiwe: "Uh, I haven't asked her yet. I forgot. But I can ask her now."

-KG: "Do that."

She took her phone out of her back pocket and called Palesa. She said she didn't have a problem with KG having her number, in fact she sounded excited about it. Sthandiwe hung up and looked at KG.

-Sthandiwe: "She says to give it to you. But before I do that I want to ask you something."

-KG: "What is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Are you done being a fuck boy? Palesa is my friend too and I don't wanna see her hurt."

-KG: "I love her, ST. And I'm sure you've never heard me talk like this about anyone before."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good then. Give me your phone."

He did and she punched in Palesa's phone number and saved it. Then handed it back to him.

-Sthandiwe: "So when are you gonna call her?"

-KG: "I dunno. I'm kinda scared, you know."

-Sthandiwe: "You, Kagiso Phiri, scared of a woman? That's a first."

-KG: "What am I gonna say to her, ST? I mean, she's from a completely different world. She's..."

-Sthandiwe: (using KG's language) "A cheese girl?"

-KG: "Yeah that. We're are two completely different people."

-Sthandiwe: "They say opposites attract. And love sees past any differences, KG. I mean, look at my parents for example. They met in 1986 when apartheid was still in existence. Inter-racial couples were not allowed back then. And as an inter-racial couple that they were, they faced a lot of challenges in the society, and even almost dying, but because they loved each other, they made it work. My mom's family even disowned her because she wouldn't stop seeing my father. But that didn't bother her, she gladly chose him over her own family. And my father stood by her too. In 1987 they got married and in 1988 they had me. They made their marriage work despite everything. And when our country gained democracy in 1994, my mom's family moved back to England but she remained behind with the love of her life. Her family didn't want her anyway... They made their marriage work through it all. Their love stood strong until their dying day."

-KG: "You know, I keep forgetting that your mom was white. Maybe it's because she was a White that could speak our African languages. And you are not that yellow. In fact, that cheese boy you're dating, Chris, is more yellow than you. It's only the hair that gives you away. Oh and those brown eyes that you now hide behind those black extended wear contact lenses. Why are you doing that anyway? Are you ashamed of being known that you have some White blood running in your veins?"

-Sthandiwe: "You are missing the point here. Point is, love sees past any differences; differences in background, differences in skin colour, differences in language, and a whole lot more. If two people really love each other they can make it work despite everything. Love can weather any storm."

-KG: "Like yours and Chris, huh."

-Sthandiwe: "My relationship with Chris is still new, I can't say our love has stood the test of time."

-KG: "Way I see it, it will last until you walk down the aisle."

-Sthandiwe: "Marriage? Nah."

-KG: "What, you don't wanna get married?"

-Sthandiwe: "I grew up with both parents, in a loving home, so of course, I do wanna get married someday. I just don't think it's something that's gonna happen any time soon."

-KG: "But do you see Chris as someone you can spend the rest of your life with?"

-Sthandiwe: "If this is your way of asking if I'm sure about Chris or that I won't go back to Alizwa, then the answer is yes. KG, I did a lot of thinking last night, and now I know what I want as far as relationships are concerned. I am done with Alizwa, he's my past."

-KG: "And Chris is your present and future? You haven't answered my question yet."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris is a great guy. He's someone I could start a family with. He has all the features of a great husband and a father. And I love him."

KG smiled.

-KG: "That's what I wanted to hear."

-Sthandiwe: "You do know that you're being weird right now, right? Anyway, I'm exhausted, buddy. I need to go and sleep. Are you sleeping over?"

-KG: "Yeah. My flat just got painted today, so yah."

-Sthandiwe: "And here I was thinking you came 'cause you miss me. Ugh. Anyway, if you're hungry, just see what you can eat in the kitchen. I'm going to bed."

She stood up and walked back to the kitchen. She put the glass in the sink, empty, and walked out the front door to get her laptop from the car. Then she parked the car inside the garage and got back inside the house. She went to the kitchen and found KG sitting on the counter having some energy bars. She just took the box of chocolates she got from Palesa and made her way to the stairs.

-Sthandiwe: "Night, buddy."

-KG: "Hey, ST."

She turned to look at him.

-KG: "About your access to René's house, I don't think your house is safe either. When I was here alone the whole day on Friday, I did some security check on this house. I found at least 3 points of entry for potential intruders. And, ST, you can't afford to have that, not with René on your back. She told you that she can strike anywhere and at anytime. So, I think you really should get someone to install security system here. And there's a guy I know that can do that. His company also do panic rooms."

Sthandiwe was now thinking about the front door key that René has.

-Sthandiwe: "KG, I don't panic. But you can get your guy here tomorrow in the afternoon. All I need from him are surveillance cameras, nothing else. Leave everything else the way it is. Do they install surveillance cameras?"

-KG: "Of course."

-Sthandiwe: "Then get him here tomorrow...And stop being a chicken and call Palesa. Goodnight."

-KG: "Night."

She climbed up the stairs.

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She got to the bedroom and put the chocolates and the laptop on the bed. Then went to the bathroom to take a quick shower. After that she put on her PJs and sat up on the bed. She took her laptop and FaceTimed Chris. He answered.

-Chris: "Hey, beautiful."

He was in his home office, working on his laptop when the call came through.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, babe. Unjani? [how are you?]"

-Chris: "I'm good, hon. Are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. I hope I'm not disturbing you though. I can see that you're in your home office."

-Chris: "No, no, no, you could never disturb me, sthandwa sam. Yes, I was working but I always have time for you...Actually, I was about to call you. I miss you, sthandwa sam, and I can't wait to see you this weekend."

-Sthandiwe: "I miss you too, babe. I can't wait to be with you. And since the September break begins on Friday, I'll spend the whole week with you. Then after that, we won't have to be apart again, because I have resigned. And I'm moving down there permanently this December."

-Chris: "What? You're moving here?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. I'm done with Jo'burg, babe, and I want to be with you."

She wasn't sure how he was going to take it. He kept quiet for a moment then smiled.

-Chris: "That's good news, babe. Because me moving up there is not gonna be easy as I initially thought. But now that you're the one moving down here, I'm over the moon. You've made things easier."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad you like it. And of course we'll visit Jo'burg, your family is here and my friends are here too."

-Chris: "Have I told you how much I love you lately?"

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "A lot. But I don't mind hearing it a hundred times a day."

Chris laughed.

-Chris: "Ndiyakuthanda, Sthandiwe [I love you, Sthandiwe], a lot. Even when you fucked up, I didn't stop loving you."

-Sthandiwe: "I love you too, Chris. And I promise, I'll never fuck up again. I'll never hurt you again, babe. And thank you for giving me another chance...But now let me leave you to your work. We'll talk in the morning. Goodnight, babe."

-Chris: "Sleep tight, angel."

They blew each other kisses then ended the call. Sthandiwe closed the laptop and put it on the nightstand. Then started enjoying the chocolates. By the time she decided to get under covers, they were almost finished.

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In the morning, she got woken up by KG's knock on the door. She had overslept. She quickly got out of bed and went to open. KG had already showered and ready to leave.

-KG: "You were still sleeping? Hey, it's 06:45 now, you're gonna be late for work."

-Sthandiwe: "Eish, I've overslept. You're leaving now?"

-KG: "Yep. But before I go I need you to lend me your guitar."

-Sthandiwe: "You mean my father's guitar."

-KG: "Yeah. You'll get it back Friday."

She thought about it for a moment. Then:

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, go get it from the music room. The door's not locked. Me, I need to hit the shower."

-KG: "Thanks. After taking it I'm leaving, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sure. See you later."

She ran to the bathroom, stripped off her clothes and got in the shower. KG took the guitar and went to catch a taxi home. He had to go to work.

After the shower, Sthandiwe made her bed and dressed for work. Then grabbed her laptop and phone and rushed downstairs. In the kitchen, she grabbed some fruit then walked out of the house. She locked the front door and the burglar gate then went to get the car out of the garage. When she got inside the car, she called Sihle and asked her to tail Ethan, Reneé's brother, for the whole day. And told her that she'd call her later for an update. Sihle didn't have a problem with that. After hanging up, she took the file Sihle gave her on Ethan. She opened it and there were several surveillance photos of a 15 year-old-girl in a school uniform and in normal clothes, alone and with who seemed to be a friend of hers, outside her school and outside her home. She looked at the photos for a long beat then closed the file and put it in the back seat of the car. Then drove off to work.

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She got to work and went to her lectures. Then around 13:00 she took the test question papers and left them with Letty again. Letty and the others were going to invigilate. She on the other hand had more important things to do than to show her face in that lecture room during the test. She left the campus and drove straight home, she had to go sign for the delivery from Elite Watches. After that she drove to Randburg to meet up with the PI as per their agreement. She got to his office and he put two files on the desk in front of her.

-Sthandiwe: "Is this everything I asked for?"

-The PI: "You'll be the judge of that. But I'll say this much, what's in the top file is juicy enough to get you killed."

-Sthandiwe: "Then that means it's good."

-The PI: "But before you open any of these files, I need my money in my account."

-Sthandiwe: "Of course. Do you mind getting off your chair so I could use your laptop?"

-The PI: "No problem."

-Sthandiwe: "And give me your bank details."

He did. She used his laptop to make the transfer. After that:

-Sthandiwe: "And the girl, Minenhle?"

-The PI: "I've found MaNgcobo. She's still in Cape Town. Mowbray. You'll find her address, phone number and everything you'll need in the bottom file."

She shook his hand.

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you."

Then she left with the files. She got to her car and studied them. Then drove off to Thumeka's office to collect the arsenic. When she got there, Thumeka had it and she gave it to her, against her better judgement. She thanked her and left. She got to her car and called Uncle Mike and asked to see him. He told her to meet him at her father's former company in Sandton. She hung up and drove there. But on the way KG called and told her that he was at her place with the guy from the security company. So she changed and drove to Auckland Park. She got there and they were waiting for her. They discussed the positioning of the cameras and the guy with his men started installing them and the monitors inside. They knew what they were doing and they got done pretty quickly. They showed her how everything worked and gave her the invoice immediately after. She transferred the money into their account and they left. KG also left immediately after that. It was now around 17:30 and Uncle Mike had already left the office so she drove to his house.

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She got there and Uncle Mike let her in. She parked in the driveway, got inside and found him in the main room. She greeted and sat down.

-Uncle Mike: "So what's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: "When I was here the other day, you said Paul Mason " rebelled" and that's why my father bought him out of his company. What did you mean by that?"

Uncle Mike just looked at her, unsure.

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay, you can tell me, I can take it. You see, I already know that on the surface uncle Paul looks like any other businessman but scratch the surface and there's a chewy criminal centre. Ties to organised crime; I'm talking drug trade, human trafficking..."

-Uncle Mike: "Wait, how do you know this?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not stupid, Uncle Mike. I know things. So please tell me, what went down?"

-Uncle Mike: "Your father found out that Paul wanted to use his company to clean money from his dirty operations. BB didn't want his company to be involved in those kinds of activities, hence the falling out they had. Even now, I'm sure he wanted that company for the same reason - to use it as a front for his dirty operations. He wants a new front business just to throw the authorities off, because they are onto him."

-Sthandiwe: "Do you think the accident that killed my parents was no accident at all? Do you think maybe it was all Mason's work? Do you think he killed my parents? Please be honest with me."

-Uncle Mike: "To be honest, I think he did it. I don't know how but I think he was behind it. He hated your father, and it's deep."

-Sthandiwe: "And you didn't tell me this before because?"

-Uncle Mike: "Because I knew you'd be angry. And I didn't want you to do something stupid out of anger. Your father wouldn't want you to do that."

-Sthandiwe: (under her breath) "Lie."

-Uncle Mike: "What was that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing. I was just saying you're right."

-Uncle Mike: "Yeah. So don't do anything that'd get you into trouble."

-Sthandiwe: "Relax, I won't do anything. I mean, whatever I do won't bring my parents back."

-Uncle Mike: "Exactly."

-Sthandiwe: "Speaking of uncle Paul, I've noticed that he still lives in the same house he lived in 8 years ago."

-Uncle Mike: "He bought it 20 years ago and he doesn't want to leave it. Paul is a man of habit. He never changes what he's used to."

-Sthandiwe: "I see. Habit can get you killed so easily sometimes."

-Uncle Mike: "Huh? What do you mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I was just saying...Anyway, I gotta go. Thanks for clarifying some things for me."

Uncle Mike was now suspicious but he didn't say anything.

-Uncle Mike: "Any time."

She got up, said her goodbyes and left.

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After he left Uncle Mike's house she called Sihle asking about Ethan's location. She told her he was in some bar in Northcliff. She drove there and when she parked in the parking lot she noticed Ethan's Rover, the one that was driven by Reneé, in the parking lot. She took the file she got from Sihle and took out everything that was inside except for the pictures of that 15 year-old girl. There was also a picture of Ethan himself in there. She looked at it then put it aside. She got out of the car with the file containing the pictures of the girl and walked inside the upscale bar. She looked around and spotted Ethan sitting alone at the bar. He looked exactly the way he looked in the photo. She walked towards him and sat down on a chair next to him. He didn't even pay attention to her, focusing on the glass of whiskey he was drinking.

-Sthandiwe: "Ethan Hunt."

He put the glass down and looked at her. He got a little startled to see that it was her.

-Sthandiwe: "Is that who you think you are? Ethan Hunt?"

He looked at her, kind of confused.

-Sthandiwe: "Ethan Hunt of the IMF. Impossible Missions Force."

-Ethan: "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll tell you exactly what I'm talking about. You're not Ethan Hunt and I'm an impossible mission, baby. Keep coming after me and I promise you, there'll be one less breathing 15 year-old girl in Bronkhorstspuit."

She put the file in front of him, opened it and scattered the photos so he could see them all. Then she watched as the blood drained from his face.

-Ethan: "Listen here, bitch. I..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "No, you're the bitch here. The things you do, man. You rape the daughter of a maid, knock her up and go to prison for it. Then you get out and help take care of the child. You actually love her, a child of rape. You support her, you send her money every month. Wow. That's quite something. Now imagine if she were to just disappear. Your little girl."

-Ethan: "You better stay away from my daughter if you know what's good for you. If you dare touch her..."

-Sthandiwe: "You'll do what? Listen, I get that you're hurt over your mother's death but that doesn't give you a right to want to come after me. I didn't kill your mother, dude. Just accept that she's gone, drown your sorrows in booze or whatever. Just don't come after me or we'll have a big problem. Now, sit here and drink your worries away. Don't worry, the booze is on me."

And with that she took out several 200 rand notes from her pocket and made them rain on his face. Then she walked away, leaving him stunned.

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Sthandiwe walked out of the upscale bar with her hands tucked in the front pockets of her jeans and went to Muzi's car parked in the parking lot, she knew that it was driven by Sihle. She knocked on the driver's side window and Sihle rolled it down.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, chomi. Thanks for helping me out. You can go home now."

-Sihle: "Everything went well?"

-Sthandiwe: "I believe so...See you Saturday morning. You got your flight ticket, right?"

-Sihle: "Yeah. And I can't wait...You going home now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. So you also need to get outta here."

-Sihle: "Goodnight then."

-Sthandiwe: "Night, chomi. And thanks once again."

Sihle started the engine and backed out of the parking bay. She waved as she drove off, Sthandiwe waved back then went to her car. She got in and drove home.

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She got home around 20:00 and parked the car inside the garage. Then she went inside the house and locked the front door but deliberately left the porch burglar gate not locked. As she passed by her parents portrait in the lounge, she stopped and looked at her father.

-Sthandiwe: "You taught me to never underestimate my opponent. I won't underestimate this one either."

Then she climbed up the stairs and went to the music room. The only room in the house, besides the dojo, where she and her father used to have their bonding sessions, where he taught her some valuable

lessons. She walked in and it was now no longer dusty, because she now had the courage to walk in and clean it every time when she cleans the house. She went to a desk in the corner, leaned on it and looked at a copper-plated chess set on it.

-Sthandiwe: "I still remember the last game we ever played together, dad. (she smiled) You kicked my ass. And I still remember all the moves you made. Yeah, I have a good memory and it's gonna serve me well tomorrow... You told me that in chess I should think at least five moves ahead in order to beat my opponent. And now I'm applying that in real life. I'm not only planning my moves but I'm also predicting my opponent's moves."

She took the queen piece and looked at it.

-Sthandiwe: "Human beings are predictable creatures...I've got to be the queen in this game."

She put the queen piece down and walked out of the room to her bedroom. She went straight to the bathroom and took a shower. After that she put on her PJs and went to get her gun out of the safe and put it on the nightstand. Then she got to bed and called Chris. They talked until she fell asleep.

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In the morning she got up, made her bed and went to take a shower. Then she got ready for work. But before leaving, she called Alizwa.

-Alizwa: "MamTshawe."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. I'm going to Reneé's today."

-Alizwa: "Today? But why didn't you just say so when you were here yesterday?"

-Sthandiwe: "I said I'd call and that's exactly what I'm doing right now. So, please keep her away from the house around 14:00 until late."

-Alizwa: "Will do. And I'll also help you with the surveillance cameras. I'll disable them from the inside. That's gonna be easier than any other plan you may have."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, you can go ahead and do that. Thanks. Talk later."

She hung up.

-Sthandiwe: (chuckling) "He really wants to help me...So predictable. Guess I'm not gonna need that jammer anymore."

Then she scrolled down on her contacts until she reached "Phila" and dialled. He answered.

-Phila: "Hello."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Phila. How's it?"

-Phila: "Sis' Thandi, is that you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, it's me. You good?"

-Phila: "I'm good but I was hoping I'd never have to take this call."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh?"

-Phila: "Yeah. The last time we spoke you said since you helped me you'd also call some day and ask me for a favour. So, I think today's that day. And I don't have anything to offer."

-Sthandiwe: "Stop being dramatic, Phila. Yes, I do need a favour from you but it's nothing big. I just need you to do a delivery for me."

-Phila: "Oh? To where?"

-Sthandiwe: "Where you at now?"

-Phila: "My flat in Bree Street."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'll call you later for a meet. And I'll tell you everything then."

-Phila: "Okay, I'll wait for your call."

She hung up. Then took her things, including the DVD with the footage of Reneé, and went to the study. She took the file with the info on Detective Shepherd from the shelf and memorised her home address. Then she took a pair of latex gloves from their box and got the bag with KG's guns out of the cabinet then walked out. She walked out of the house and locked both the front door and the burglar. Then went to get the car out of the garage. She put the guns in the boot and went to sit behind the wheel. She took the harmless-looking white powder, the arsenic, out of her bag and looked at it for a long beat. Thumeka had given her way more than she had asked for, which was a good thing. She smiled then put it back in the bag and drove to work.

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When she got to her office, Letty was already waiting for her by the door, carrying a box with the test scripts from the day before. She took them, thanked her then walked inside her office. She put them on the desk then walked out and went to Xolisa's office.

-Xolisa: "Morning."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, I need a favour."

-Xolisa: "Yeah?"

-Sthandiwe: "I need you to get me nitric acid from our storage room of chemicals. Jansen won't give me the keys to that room because I have no business being in there. But you on the other hand, you still carry out experiments so you have a reason to be in there."

-Xolisa: "What do you need nitric acid for?"

-Sthandiwe: "I have arsenic trioxide and I want to use it to prepare arsenic acid by treating it with the concentrated nitric acid."

-Xolisa: "Arsenic acid? What do you need that for?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's more soluble in whisky than the arsenic trioxide. That's all I'm gonna say for now. But please get me the nitric acid."

-Xolisa: "You're freaking me out but fine, I'll do it."

He went to get the keys from Prof Jansen and went to get the nitric acid. He offered to prepare the arsenic acid himself in the lab. Sthandiwe gave him the arsenic trioxide and went back to her office to mark the test scripts.

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Meanwhile in Sandton, Ethan walked into René's office at her ad agency without even knocking.

-Renée: "And now?"

-Ethan: "I told you that bitch, Sthandiwe, threatened my daughter. Why are you so calm? We need to make a move."

-Renée: "I told you that she is smart so we have to be careful. We can't go after her with a half-cooked plan or she'll win again."

-Ethan: "Fuck that, I'm going after her. I'm going to blow her brains off myself. That bitch killed our mother, René, and now she's threatening my daughter. She needs to go...You still have her front door key, right?"

-Renée: "Yes. But she locks the the burglar gate sometimes. I went there two times before and found the gate locked."

-Ethan: "You said 'sometimes'. That's all I need. Just give me the damn key, I might just get lucky. If not, I'll find a way to bypass the burglar gate."

-Renée: "You're making a mistake. You don't have to do this yourself. You don't have to get your hands dirty, we can get someone to do it for us."

-Ethan: "You mean like you did with Ted and that guy in that warehouse in Booyens? And how did that workout for you, huh? See, if you want something done right, do it yourself. Besides, involving more people is never a good idea. They just become liabilities. I'm doing this myself, now give me the fuckin' key."

She could see that there was no changing his mind so she took the key out of her set of keys and handed it to him.

-Ethan: "Are there any cameras there?"

-Reneé: "No. Al never said anything about cameras. And I never saw any when I was there."

-Ethan: "Good. I'm going there tonight. I want to get in when no one can see me and catch her when she's fast asleep. Now, do you have the layout of the house?"

-Reneé: "I have the drawings Al made. They are in my email, I didn't want to keep hard copies that could be seen by anyone when things heat up."

-Ethan: "Good, forward them to me now. I need..."

Reneé held up her hand, stopping him, because her cellphone was ringing - an incoming call from Alizwa. She answered. Alizwa was telling her that he wanted them to meet at the house in Houghton and discuss their marriage. Saying he wanted to give it another try. He asked her to lose her guards, saying he wanted to be alone with her. And because she loved him, she believed him and by the time she hung up she was super excited.

-Reneé: "Things are looking up, bro. Al is coming back to me. He's realised his mistake and he wants us to fix our marriage. I knew that he'd get back to his senses."

-Ethan: "That's good, hope it works out. But Sthandiwe still has to be eliminated. Now forward me the house layout."

She did and Ethan left. Then she got her things and left her office, going home to prepare for Alizwa's arrival. All excited.

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Sthandiwe finished marking and was already recording the marks when the BMW dealership called. After hanging up, she finished recording the marks and went to Xolisa's office. It was now around 12:00.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you busy?"

-Xolisa: "Yep, my lab data is not gonna record itself."

-Sthandiwe: "You can do that later, buddy. Please, I need you to come with me."

-Xolisa: "Where to?"

-Sthandiwe: "Melrose Arch. Please."

Xolisa agreed to go with her. They drove to the dealership to collect the car Sthandiwe had bought - a BMW 328i. Xolisa drove it back to Auckland Park, while Sthandiwe drove back in KG's Corolla. They went to leave it at Sthandiwe's garage then drove back to campus. When they got there, Sthandiwe just took the crystallised arsenic acid and had to leave the campus again.

-Sthandiwe: "XO, I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow morning. There's a party I gotta go to."

-Xolisa: "A party?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

She left.

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Mel drove Alizwa to Houghton and when they got there, Reneé was already waiting for him. Mel helped him get out of the car then she got back in the car to wait for him. He didn't need help getting inside the house, as his wheelchair was self-propelling. Reneé met him at the front door and let him inside.

-Reneé: "Hey, come on in... But honestly, it pains me to see you in this chair."

-Alizwa: "Don't worry, I'll be off of it in the next two weeks."

They went to the dining room and she had prepared a romantic lunch. But before they could sit at the table, Alizwa asked to be excused, saying he was going to the bathroom. He left Reneé there and used the elevator to go to the first floor to disable the cameras from the study. He moved around the house easily because it was handicap accessible as Reneé had also been on a wheelchair for years. He got to the study and went to the DVR. He went to recording settings, unchecked that day and stopped the recording. After he was done, he went back downstairs to join Reneé. The guy was a good liar, so he sat at that table and sold Reneé all the lies she was willing to buy, just so she would leave the house with him.

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After she left the campus, Sthandiwe drove to Jo'burg. When she was about 5 minutes out, she called Phila and told him to wait for her on the street, outside his apartment building. Indeed when she got there, the 19-year-old guy was already waiting for her on the street. Wearing a black cap on his head and a black hooded sweater. Sthandiwe watched as he yanked his hoodie tight over his cap, not seeing her. She rolled the window down and called out for him.

-Sthandiwe: "Yo, Eight-mile, get in."

He went to get in the car and greeted. Sthandiwe drove off.

-Sthandiwe: "What's with the hoodie in this heat?"

-Phila: "It's my disguise. I don't know what I'll be delivering for you or how legal or illegal it is, so I don't wanna be seen."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, it's just some documents. Nothing hectic, like drugs and sh*t."

-Phila: "Okay. So where am I delivering them to?"

-Sthandiwe: "Mulbarton. I'm taking you there now."

-Phila: "You're taking me there? Then why didn't you just deliver them yourself?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not asking too many questions helps sometimes."

He kept quiet.

Sthandiwe met Phila in January of that same year. He was fresh from KZN, looking for admission at UJ and she helped him. But he didn't get a room in res because it was already too late, hence he ended up renting a cheaper flat in Jo'burg downtown.

They got to Mulbarton and looked for the address, Detective Shepherd's address. They found it in no time but they passed it and went to park down the street, around a curve. Then Sthandiwe handed Phila the DVD and the file she got from the PI with the information on René and Paul Mason and their involvement in human and sex trafficking.

-Sthandiwe: "That's what you need to deliver to that house. Now go. I'll wait for you here."

He got out of the car and walked back to the house. It was quiet, no one seemed to be home. He left the packages in the letter box and left.

As Sthandiwe was waiting for him in the car, a message from Alizwa came through. He was telling her that she was good to go, René and her guards were away from the house. She smiled to herself but the smile quickly faded when Phila got in the car.

-Phila: "It's done."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. But if you dare repeat what just happened here to anyone, I will deny it. And you'd be on your own. Got that?"

-Phila: "Relax. I'm not gonna tell anyone."

Sthandiwe just let out a weak smile and hit the gas. She went to drop Phila in Jo'burg then drove to Houghton. She got to René's mansion and used the gate remote to let herself in. She parked in the driveway and went to retrieve the bag with the guns from the boot. Then she put the latex gloves on and let herself inside the house with the keys. It was a big house, so she had to do some serious searching before she finally got to the study, where Alizwa said the big safe was. She entered the code he had given to her and the safe opened. She wiped the guns clean and put them all in the safe. Then she left the house, went back to her car and drove home.

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She got home and got herself ready for the party. Then she got in the Corolla and drove to the house in Hyde Park. She got there and parked the Corolla inside the garage. There was another car in that garage, under a custom-fit car cover. She removed the cover, revealing a BMW i8. It was her mother's. She passed away only a month after she had bought it, hence selling it didn't feel right to Sthandiwe when she was selling the other car her mother owned and her father's second car.

-Sthandiwe: "Mhhh, not dusty at all. Now let's see what you can do for me."

She went to get the keys from the key box in the corner of the garage then went to sit behind the wheel. She took her phone out of her bag and checked the message she got from Cole the other day, the message with Paul Mason's address.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, same house I went to twice with my dad 8 years ago. And I'm sure it still has the same layout...Now let's do this."

She started the car, drove out of the garage and off to Midrand, to Paul's party.

She got there around 19:30 and when she was about to enter through the open gate of the walled compound, she called Cole and told him that she was driving in. There was a line of Mercedes, BMWs, Bentleys, Ferraris, Porsches, passing through security at the gate. Good thing she didn't use the Corolla. The cars were being checked by security, and hers also passed through the same process before being let in. She got out of the car and surrendered her car keys to a valet in the courtyard of the magnificent mansion. But before getting to where the party was at, she had to pass through another security point again. She got scanned by an electric wand and so did her bag. But she was calm through out the entire process because knew that she had no detectable killing weapon on her. So much security meant one thing, Mr Party had some enemies and that was going to work on Sthandiwe's favour - probably no one would suspect her as the killer. And she looked just like any other innocent 27-year-old girl next door, so harmless.

After passing through security, she followed the rest of the guests to the front door. But she was intercepted by another security guard.

-Security Guard: "Uh, miss excuse me, where's your invitation? You can't go through without it."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm with someone."

-Voice: "It's alright, Cooper. She's with me."

It was Cole. He came to her already smiling, wearing a nice designer suit. He hugged her and kissed her cheek.

-Cole: "Wow. You clean up nice. Last time I saw you, you were looking like a boy."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "You really need to work on your compliment skills, buddy...Anyway, let's join the party."

He took her hand and they went through the French doors and to the vast backyard where a no-expense-spared party was in full swing. Everyone was dressed designer and Sthandiwe fitted in perfectly. She was wearing a stunning red Versace dress, and complimented it with Louis Vuitton heels and diamond earrings. She was shimmering and sexy.

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Cole led her through the party, to meet various guests. But she got immediately distracted and her world went into slow motion when she saw Paul Mason making his entrance. She watched as he weaved through the party like a snake through an overgrown garden. Greeting and moving on, greeting and moving on. He looked so happy and that angered Sthandiwe. There he was, celebrating his birthday whereas her parents were dead and buried because of him. She really had to kill him.

-Sthandiwe: (to Cole) "Excuse me, I need to powder my nose."

She left and went inside the house. It was empty, everyone was in the backyard enjoying the party. She rushed upstairs to where she knew Mason's private office to be. Before turning the door knob she got the latex gloves out of her handbag and put them on. Then she opened the door and walked in.

-Sthandiwe: "Just the way I remember it."

She walked over to a corner table with some expensive spirits. There were three bottles of wine and one bottle of scotch whisky. She smiled to herself.

-Sthandiwe: "I remember you telling my father that you don't share your scotch 8 years ago. And apparently, you are a man of habit, so I'm sure that still hasn't changed even today."

She retrieved the plastic with arsenic acid crystals from an elastic band tied around her thigh and put all the crystals in the whisky bottle. After shaking it, she left the office and took off the gloves before rejoining the party.

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She went to Cole and he offered to get them some drinks. He left, came back with two glasses of wine and handed one to her. But her eyes were wandering around, looking for Mason. She spotted him standing away from the centre of the party with another man his age, a business-type kind of man. She promptly put the wine glass on a tray of a passing waitress.

-Sthandiwe: "I gotta go wish uncle Paul a happy birthday, Cole."

-Cole: "But he looks busy. Don't you think you should wait until later?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nope, in order for it to mean something it has to be now."

She left Cole standing there and walked over to Mason. She greeted with a fake smile. Mason was surprised to see her there but he also faked a smile and managed to utter some words.

-Mason: "Thandi. Wow, long time. I didn't know you were coming. How did you get in?"

Her fake smile quickly faded.

-Sthandiwe: "Through the front gate. Just like everybody else. And we need to talk. NOW."

He could see that she didn't come to play so he nodded to the man he was standing with. The man got the message and walked away.

-Mason: (still with that fake smile) "Wow. It's good to see you, Thandi. Look at you, all grown up."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, enough with the pretending, it's only the two of us now."

-Mason: "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "Listen here, you son-of-a-bitch. I know that you had me abducted 8 years ago, 3 years ago you had my parents killed and recently you were using Reneé to get my shares in my father's company for half the market value. It was gonna look like she was the owner of those shares, she was gonna be the majority shareholder and you'd be an invisible hand behind her. You were going to use that company for your dirty operations. But lemme tell you, that's not gonna happen because I've sold those shares to Mike Wells and you aren't going to get them."

-Mason: "Thandi, those are serious accusations."

-Sthandiwe: "I'd think very carefully about the next words that come out of my mouth if I were you, Mr Mason. You do not wanna infuriate me by playing dumb. We both know that you did all of what I just said you did, and more. I know that you are just a thug masquerading as a businessman."

-Mason: "I think you should leave."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, I'm leaving. I don't want to be here for longer than I have to. I just came to warn you. You're gonna pay for everything that you did to me and my family. You think no one can challenge you? Well, you're so fuckin' wrong. I'm gonna take you apart piece by piece. Chinese call it the death of a thousand cuts. You're going down Mason."

-Mason: "Should I call security to throw you out or are you gonna leave quietly?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm leaving. But if I get, say maybe an accident on my way home, the files I have on you and your involvement in organised crime will reach the authorities. And with all the evidence that's in there, you will go to prison. So you better make sure I'm safe."

And with that she walked away, leaving Mason standing there like a statue.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Come on, Mason, now go get your men and go to your private office to discuss your next course of action over a glass of scotch."

She went back to Cole and told him that she was leaving because she had just received a call saying one of her friends was sick, so she had to rush there. Cole was disappointed, he was losing his arm candy, but he understood. Sthandiwe went to get her car and drove home.

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Indeed, Mason rushed to his Head of Security and they went upstairs to his private office. When they walked into the office, he was fuming with anger.

-Mason: "I'm telling you that girl is becoming a problem just like her father became one 3 years ago."

He went to his bottle of scotch and poured himself a double. The arsenic acid crystals had now dissolved in it. He gulped it down in frustration.

-Head of Security: "What do you want us to do, boss? Take care of her like we did with her father?"

-Mason: "No, find out what evidence she has on me and where she's keeping it. Destroy it then kill her. In that order. Got it?"

-Head of Security: "Yes, sir."

He said that getting a glass to also pour himself some scotch. Mason gave him a look.

-Mason: "And what do you think you're doing? You know that I never share my scotch."

The guy poured himself some wine instead. Mason poured himself another glass of scotch and gulped it down again, frustrated as hell.

-Mason: "The girl should know better than to mess with me. Her father threatened to expose my operations 3 years ago and today he's pushing daisies. Because that's what you get when you mess with Paul Mason."

He poured himself another glass.

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Sthandiwe got home and parked the car in the garage. Then she went inside the house, deliberately leaving the burglar gate unlocked. She went straight to her bedroom and changed in to her summer PJs. Then got her gun out of the safe and put it on the nightstand. But before going to bed she called Chris and they talked for a few minutes.

Around 00:00 she got woken up by a beeping sound from the surveillance monitor in her bedroom. The security guys had installed surveillance monitors in each room in the house (except the lounge) and they would beep 3 times each time the front door opens - just like at Reneé's.

She quickly got out of bed and checked the monitor. She wasn't surprised to see Ethan in the flesh inviting himself into her house.

-Sthandiwe: "Here we go. What took you so long?"

She quickly put the pillows under the covers where she was sleeping. Then slowly opened the squeaking door of her bedroom and walked out with her gun to the opposite bedroom. She stood behind the door, gun drawn, just in case Ethan mistakes her bedroom for the one she was in. But he didn't. He went straight to her bedroom. She heard him open the squeaking door of her bedroom and she knew that it was a now-or-never moment.

As soon as he opened Sthandiwe's bedroom door, Ethan flicked the light on and quickly fired two shots to the bed from his gun that was fitted with a suppressor. Okay, that silence was odd. He went to remove the covers, checking his victim. Pillows. As he was still shocked by that:

-Sthandiwe: "Looking for me?"

She was standing in the doorway, her gun pointed to him. As he raised his hand to shoot, she had already pulled the trigger and the bullet was already leaving the barrel. It buried itself through the side of his head and he went down before he could pull his trigger.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't miss, motherfucker."

She fired a second shot to the ceiling. That was supposed to be the first shot, as the police would tell you - a warning shot. Then she went to take her phone from the nightstand to call the police.

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Sthandiwe called the police with her voice shaking, "scared as hell." She told them that she had just shot an intruder in her house and gave them her address. They told her to stay put, police are on their way. But she knew that the SAPS would take their time. When she hung up, she stopped acting and walked over to Ethan's dead body.

-Sthandiwe: "I told you to not come after me or we'll have a big problem. But no, you did the opposite. Just like I knew you would. Now you're dead...And your sister is going to prison. (she paced around) As for you, Paul Mason. Well, Happy Deathday, motherfucker. And your son is gon' be next."

She dropped her gun by the door and walked out to the study. The surveillance cameras in the house were using WiFi to work, so she got to the study and unplugged the router, stopping them from working. She didn't want the police to know that she saw and heard the intruder immediately when he walked in through the front door. Then she took all the files she ever got from Sihle and went to burn them in the backyard. Then she got back inside to the lounge and sat on the couch, waiting for the cops to show up. When she heard them pull up in the driveway, she started her Oscar-deserving performance again, crying and shaking. She looked distraught as she sat on that couch in a foetal position, rocking herself, tears running down her cheeks. Getting them to flow was easy, she just thought of the day she lost her parents and they came flooding down like a river.

The Brixton police knocked on the front door, identifying themselves, but she didn't answer them. She just sat there crying and rocking herself. They let themselves in through the unlocked door, Ethan hadn't locked it after he had let himself in.

There were 3 of them and they found her sitting on that couch, crying.

-Cop 1: "Miss, are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: (crying) "I...I've shot him. I've killed someone. I've killed...I've killed him."

-Cop 2: "Where's he now?"

She just pointed upstairs, while she kept repeating the same phrase "I've killed him", as if she was going crazy. Two of the cops went upstairs while the third one, a woman, took her outside to their double cab van and covered her with a blanket, she was still in her PJs. Then she drove her to the Police Station, while the other two cops waited in the house for the car that was going to come pick up Ethan's body. But she was too "distracted" to give her statement, so when they got to the police station the police just put her in the interrogation room and she sat on the chair and "tried" to fall asleep with her head on the table, covering herself with the blanket.

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Rewinding back to Midrand. After Mason left his private office, he went back to his party guests in the backyard. He officially welcomed them and made his birthday speech. The arsenic poisoning hadn't manifested yet. After that, some of his friends also made their short speeches. Greg arrived when all of that was done and everyone was just mingling and having some finger food and drinks. He went to his father to wish him a happy birthday and gave him his gift. Mason was still talking with his son when the arsenic started saying "Hey, Mason, you ingested me." He started by getting confused, forgetting what he was saying. Then he felt disorientated and dizzy. He collapsed and the party guests started screaming. They rushed to him and others poured some water on him. Greg was now kneeling beside him, shaking him.

-Greg: "Dad, what's going on? Please don't die on me...(screaming) Somebody please call an ambulance."

Several guests were on their phones, calling for help. The party was disrupted, just like that. In a fading tone, Mason asked to be taken to the bathroom, complaining about abdominal pain. Cole and Greg lifted him up and helped him inside to the bathroom. His stomach was running, diarrhea with blood. As he was using the toilet seat, they had to put a bucket in front of him because he was also vomiting, vomit with blood. And he was getting weak rapidly. The ambulance came and he was taken to Life Carstenhof Hospital. Greg rode with him in the ambulance. Cole and the Head of Security followed behind in another car. When the ambulance got there, he was quickly taken inside and into the ward. Greg was told to wait outside and two doctors attended to Mason.

Cole and the Head of Security found Greg pacing in the corridor, anxious. After an hour, the doctor came to them.

-Greg: (anxious) "Doctor, how's he? What's wrong with him?"

-Doctor: "We've hydrated and stabilised him but we still don't know what's wrong with him. We're still running some tests but we suspect food poisoning. But we won't know for sure until the test results come back."

-Greg: "Food poisoning? From what? No one else in that party got sick. It's only him."

-Doctor: "Food poisoning affects different people differently. While for some the symptoms show as early as in 2 hours after ingesting spoiled food, for others it can take days. It could be something he's eaten in the party you're talking about or something he ate yesterday."

-Cole: "The test results will take time to come back. Can't you just treat him for food poisoning in the meantime?"

-Doctor: "If it's food poisoning we'd give him antibiotics but until we know what bacteria was in the food he ate, we won't know what antibiotics to give to him. So, we have to wait for the results to come back. But in the meantime you can help by telling me what he had in that party. What did he eat?"

-Greg: "Cole will help you with that. I just wanna go see my dad. Can I?"

-Doctor: "Yeah, you can go through. But he's still weak so I'll give you only a few minutes."

Greg walked to the ward.

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He walked into the room and saw his father lying on that bed, hooked up to an IV, still weak. But he could talk.

-Mason: "Son."

-Greg: "Dad. They say this is food poisoning but I think that's bullshit. Someone has poisoned you in that party. Question is: who?"

-Mason: "You think that's what happened? But I trust everyone who was there. I only invited family, friends and business associates. I doubt any of them would wanna poison me...The only person who showed up without being invited was Thandi."

-Greg: "Thandi as in Sthandiwe, BB's daughter?"

Mason nodded.

-Greg: "Then it's obvious that she's the one who did it. I gotta get to that bitch and eliminate her before she finishes you off."

-Mason: "No, I don't think she did it. That girl knows that I had her parents killed and now she wants revenge. She told me straight that she'll take me apart piece by piece until I'm out. She wants me to suffer until I pay for what I did. So she wouldn't wanna kill me. Dying would be a light punishment."

-Greg: "If it's not her then maybe one of your enemies used one of the waitrons to poison you. I'll have to check out each and everyone of them."

The doctor came and told Greg that his time was up. So he walked out. But he didn't leave the hospital. He went to join Cole and his father's Head of Security in the waiting area. They were going to spend the night there, well until they could hear what was wrong with Mason.

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Early in the morning, before the officers that attended to her complaint knocked off at 06:00, Sthandiwe was ready to give her official statement. A false statement, of course. The first cop that asked her if she was okay back at her house, was the one taking the statement.

-Sthandiwe: "I got woken up by what sounded like footsteps coming up the stairs. I got scared, hearing that there was an intruder in my house. First thing that came to my mind was to protect myself. So I quickly went to get my gun out of the safe and hid behind the door, scared. Shortly after that, the guy just barged into my room, turned the light on and immediately fired two shots to the bed where I was supposed to be sleeping. And when he noticed that I wasn't in the bed, that's when I got out from behind the door and asked him to drop his weapon. But he didn't. I fired a warning shot but still he didn't drop his weapon. He only tried to shoot me and that's when I fired. Then I immediately called the police."

-Cop 1: "Do you know who that man was?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. I've never seen his face before."

-Cop 1: "But he obviously went to your house to kill you. Why would a stranger want to kill you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know. Or maybe he was a hitman."

-Cop 1: "Hitman hired by whom? Do you have enemies? Who would wanna hurt you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know who would want me dead. Because as far as I know, I have no enemies."

-Cop 1: "But in my experience, no one gets a hitman sent to their house for no reason. Someone obviously wants you dead."

-Sthandiwe: "And I don't know who that someone is. If I did, I wouldn't hesitate to tell you."

-Cop 1: "It's probably someone close to you because your house wasn't broken into. That man used a key to let himself in and we found it in his pocket. He had your front door key. Who else has your key?"

She acted as if she was shocked.

-Sthandiwe: "What? He had my front door key? No one has my front door key. I'm the only one who has it."

-Cop 1: "Then they copied it. This person is or was close to you enough to get a chance to copy the key. You still don't know who it could be?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. I haven't a clue."

After giving that statement, the police took her back home. And they got to process the scene because they couldn't the night before. She sat outside in the front porch as they did what they were doing. When they were done they told her that she could get inside. She acted scared to. Then she asked if she could go away for a few days, as she couldn't stay in that house. The police gave her a green light but told her that they would want to talk to her again soon. She asked one of the cops to escort her to her bedroom to pack her clothes and everything she was going to take with to Cape Town. The cop did just that. She packed her stuff and went to put the suitcase downstairs in the lounge. Then she walked the cops out.

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Just as they drove off, Alizwa's car pulled up at the entrance. Sthandiwe was standing in the front porch so she saw it and walked over to it. It was driven by Mel, Alizwa sitting in the back seat. Sthandiwe greeted Mel then went to Alizwa's window.

-Alizwa: "Thando lwam [My love]"

-Sthandiwe: "Al. What are you doing here? Not to mention that it's still so early in the morning."

-Alizwa: "Please get inside."

Sthandiwe considered that for a moment then walked around the car to get in on the other side of the back seat. Alizwa asked Mel to excuse them, so she got out of the car and went to sit in the front porch.

-Alizwa: "I just saw cops leaving. What's going on? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. I just shot an intruder in my house last night."

-Alizwa: (shocked) "What? Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm fine. I can't say the same about the intruder though. Dead."

-Alizwa: "Do you know who it was?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. He was just a random stranger. Never seen him before."

-Alizwa: "Yoh, I'm so sorry, thando lwam. You almost died...He broke in?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nope. He had a copy of my front door key."

-Alizwa: (shocked) "A copy of your front door key? But I told you that Reneé has that key and I told you to always lock the burglar gate. Why didn't you?"

She just shrugged.

-Alizwa: "Or maybe it was a trap. You wanted her to come so you'd kill her in what would seem like self-defence."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know what you're talking about."

She didn't want to tell him the truth. She didn't really trust him.

-Alizwa: "And what you wanted to do in her house yesterday, how did it go?"

-Sthandiwe: "It went."

Her answer was that short. And as he still wanted to ask more, he got distracted by a car that pulled up behind his car.

-Sthandiwe: "That's my florist. I asked her to come early today because I don't wanna miss my flight."

-Alizwa: "Going somewhere?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Cape Town."

-Alizwa: "To Chris?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes."

He looked away, out the window, hurt. After a moment, he looked at her.

-Alizwa: "Thandi, I love you. Always remember that. And I'll fight for you. I know you still love me too and I'll fight for our love."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't waste your time, Al. I meant what I said to you...And now I have to go. Like I said, I have a plane to catch."

And with that she got out of the car without even hearing what he had come to see her for. She went to her florist's car to collect her white lilies and four gift boxes that she had asked her to bring for her.

Out of the window, Alizwa called Mel telling her that they had to go. She went to the car, passing Sthandiwe on the way. She said her goodbyes to her then got into Alizwa's car and they drove off. Alizwa was deeply hurt.

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In Midrand. Greg and Cole were still sitting in the waiting area at the hospital, waiting for the doctor to come and at least tell them something good. Mason's Head of Security had left. The two were visibly exhausted from not sleeping but they still had to wait. Mason's condition had changed for the worst over night, and they were worried as hell.

Greg's phone rang. It was his sister, Heather. Cole's girlfriend. He answered.

-Greg: "Sis."

-Heather: "Hey. I've landed and I'm on my way to you now. How's dad?"

-Greg: "Not good. He had multiple seizures last night and he slipped into a coma. The doctors still haven't told us what's wrong with him. But we're still waiting to hear from them."

-Heather: "Do you think someone did this to him?"

But before he could answer that, he saw the doctor approaching them, looking sad and down. Obviously, he wasn't going to be the bearer of good news. Greg immediately got distracted.

-Heather: "Greg? Are you still there?"

-Greg: "Heather, I'm gonna get back to you."

He hung up as the doctor got to them.

-Doctor: "I'm sorry, he didn't make it. We tried our best but...I'm very sorry."

Then he turned and walked away. Greg's world was thrown into turmoil. He staggered. Cole tried to help him sit down but he literally pushed him away. Cole let him be, he sat on the chair and buried his face on his hands. He was also hurt, Mason was the father of his girlfriend after all.

Greg walked slowly towards his father's ward, tears threatening to fall, but he was trying so hard to prevent that from happening. He got to his father's room and stood in the doorway. He looked at his father's lifeless body on the bed and tears streamed out of his eyes. He couldn't hold them back anymore. He walked over to his father and buried his face on his chest. He sobbed uncontrollably.

Heather walked in and found him in that state. She looked at her father's cold body and tears threatened to fall but they didn't. She walked over to Greg and patted his shoulder.

-Heather: "Greg. It's gonna be okay. It's gonna be okay."

Greg got up to his feet. Heather pulled him in an embrace.

-Greg: "It's not gonna be okay, Heather. He's gone. Our father's gone...The only thing that would make me feel better is finding the person who did this to him and kill them myself. We'll have to find them, Heather."

-Heather: "Kill them and go to prison? Is that what you want? Greg, our father was no saint. We both know that he was involved in organised crime. We know that the DPCI (The Hawks) and SARS are sniffing around, looking into him and his companies' trading practices because he's suspected in drug trafficking, sex trafficking and money laundering."

-Greg: (angry) "And your point is?"

-Heather: "My point is, you can't throw away your life by avenging his death. I don't mean to be heartless but we both know that he made his bed and now he's lying in it. He's made some enemies because of his dirty dealings. So maybe one of those enemies did this to him. So, bro, I'm sorry but whatever you do just count me out of your revenge plan."

-Greg: (in disbelief) "Heather, how could you? We're talking about our father here...You know what, just get out. NOW!"

She didn't hesitate, she walked out. She went to Cole and they left the hospital.

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Greg remained in that room, looking at his father. And tears were trickling down again. The doctor came in.

-Doctor: "Sir?"

Greg didn't answer, still looking at his father's body, almost hypnotised. The doctor moved closer to him.

-Doctor: "Mr Mason, I'm so sorry but we need to move him now."

Greg snapped out of it and looked at the doctor, angry. Angry that they couldn't save his father. But he didn't say anything.

-Doctor: "The results of the tests we did will come back and an autopsy will also be done, we'll know what happened to your father."

Greg just walked to the door.

-Doctor: "Are you gonna be alright?"

-Greg: "Just find out what really happened to my father and let me know."

Then he walked out, wiping his tears. Down the corridor he called his father's Head of Security.

-Greg: "My father's gone."

-Head of Security: "What?"

-Greg: "You heard me."

-Head of Security: "I'm sorry, man. What can I do to help?"

-Greg: "Find out who did this. And I'll deal with them myself."

-Head of Security: "Let us deal with that. I already have my men working on finding out who it is. They are questioning the waitrons as we speak. If or when they get a name, we'll handle it."

-Greg: "Just get me what I need to know and leave everything else to me."

He hung up and walked out of the hospital looking like a man on a mission.

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In Houghton, things were also heating up.

The day before, after Detective Shepherd got the packages Sthandiwe had left for her in her letter box, she rushed back to the Police Station and had her Captain get warrants to deal with Reneé. And with the evidence they had, they got both the arrest warrant and a search warrant. Shepherd was pleased. Her husband hadn't died in vain after all.

So that morning, she got to Reneé's house in Houghton, with Detective Ncube and two other uniformed cops, and hit the intercom. Reneé answered and let them in. When they pulled up in the driveway, she was already waiting for them by the front door.

-Reneé: "What can I do for you? Are you here to harrass me again or you're here to apologise?"

-Det. Ncube: "Miss Parker, we have a warrant for your arrest and a search warrant to search this property."

-Reneé: (shocked) "What? That's absurd. Lemme see that."

They handed the search warrant to her and she read it.

-Reneé: "This is ridiculous."

-Det. Shepherd: "Please step aside, miss."

She motioned for the uniformed cops to get inside and start searching. Then asked Reneé to take her to her safe. She did, not worried about anything. And when the guns were found in it, her eyes went wide, shocked.

-Det. Shepherd: "Are these even registered?"

-Reneé: "Whose guns are those? They are not mine, I swear."

But to Shepherd that was just an act.

-Det. Shepherd: "Stop playing games with us. The guns are in your safe, that means they are yours."

She got her handcuffs out.

-Det. Shepherd: "Turn around. (cuffing her) Reneé Parker, you are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent and I suggest you do 'cause you lie a lot. But if you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against your ass in the court of law. You have the right to an attorney. But if for some fucked up reason you can't afford one, one will be appointed for you by the state...Do you understand these rights?"

Reneé nodded, tears trickling down her cheeks. They took her away.

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After she got back inside the house, Sthandiwe went to take a shower in the guest bathroom. Then she went downstairs where her clothes and toiletries were. After lotioning herself, she got dressed in a maxi dress and Dolce & Gabbana flat sandals. She did minimal make up, let her long hair down and put on her

Luis Vuitton sunglasses. Then she used the gift boxes, putting designated gifts inside. And put them in the suitcase with her clothes. Then she took the suitcase and the flowers and left the house. She locked and went to get in her car in the garage. But before driving off, she took her phone and called her PI.

-The PI: "Blie."

-Sthandiwe: "Morning. Did you get my message yesterday?"

-The PI: "Sorry I didn't get back to you but yes, I got it. I'm in Cape Town as we speak."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, good. I'll send you the address when I get there...And when you come back to Jo'burg, I want you to get me everything you can on Greg Mason, Paul Mason's son."

-The PI: "Will do. (he chuckled) You pay well, so I would never say no to you."

-Sthandiwe: "Great. Thanks. We'll talk later."

She hung up, then called KG and told him that she was going to pick him up and ride with him to the airport. Then she drove off to the cemetery. She got there, removed the old flowers on the graves and replaced them with the fresh ones.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey guys, you'd be happy to know that I've avenged your death last night...Dad, I'm sure you're proud of me now. You taught me well... I listened to Uncle Mike the other day saying you wouldn't want me to avenge your death. But I just knew that was a lie. In fact, it was bullshit. You taught me to fight and that's exactly what I've done...BB lives on. You live on, dad. Inside me."

Then she walked away. Got in her car and drove to Palmridge in a breakneck speed. When she got there, she found KG already waiting for her by the gate, his weekend bag hanging over his shoulder. She pulled up and got out of the car. KG was open-mouthed at the sight of the car.

-KG: "Wow, ST. Is this your new ride?"

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Hold it right there, buddy, before you compliment me. This is not my car, I didn't buy it. It was my mom's but driving it just never seemed right until yesterday when I felt I had to."

-KG: "But it suits you. You should drive it more often."

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe I will. Anyway, how's your flat now that it's painted? Let me go in, I wanna see it."

-KG: "No, no, no. You can't."

He looked kind of nervous.

-Sthandiwe: "I can't? Why?"

-KG: "Because we don't have time. We're running late. We gotta go now."

He said that already walking to the passenger side of the car. Sthandiwe let it go. She got in the car and drove off. They were sure running out of time.

-Sthandiwe: "And my guitar? You said you'd bring it back on Friday. And Friday was yesterday."

-KG: "I did go to your house around 19:00, but you weren't there. I called you but you didn't pick up."

-Sthandiwe: "Uh, sorry, buddy. I was out. I was busy the whole day yesterday, squashing some cockroaches. But you'll get to hear all about that when we get to Cape Town."

KG let out a smile. He knew what she meant by that, and he was pleased.

They got to the airport and Sthandiwe went to get her car a spot in the secure parking. Then they went to the others. Xolisa, Sihle and Palesa were already waiting for them. They went to board their 12:30 flight. And it was bye Jozi and hello Kaapstad.

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They touched the ground in Cape Town and Chris was already waiting for them. They shared some hugs and pound shakes with him before taking their luggage to his Audi Q7. Palesa and KG wanted their privacy, so they went to sit in the cramped bench seat in the third row. Xolisa and Sihle sat in the second row. Then Sthandiwe sat with her man in the front and he drove them to his apartment in Bantry Bay.

As the others were chatting with each other on the way, KG and Palesa had excluded themselves in the conversation. They were in their own world at the back, chatting, laughing.

-Chris: (looking at them in the rearview mirror) "What's happening with those two?"

-Xolisa: "What's happening is that I dragged my feet. And now Kagiso has beat me to it. But it's cool."

-Chris: "Beat you to what? You both know that's my sister, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Lisa is an adult, babe."

Chris just let out a smile and shook his head.

They got to his glass apartment with sensational ocean views. They were all impressed. It was luxurious and neat. Pure opulence. But it had only 2 bedrooms so they were gonna stay in a hotel. He had booked them all, except for Sthandiwe, into a hotel. But they were going to check in later. In the meantime they all wanted to just enjoy his apartment and each other's company. Sthandiwe sent the address, Chris' address, to her PI before they all went to sit in the balcony enjoying the ocean view. Chris served them some drinks and snacks. But there were only three seats in that balcony, so Sthandiwe went to sit on KG's lap.

-Chris: (joking) "Yo, buddy, you do know that's my woman, right?"

-KG: "And I'm her brother."

-Sthandiwe: "And a brother is more important than a boyfriend."

-Chris: "Oh, you're ganging up on me now?"

They all laughed.

-Palesa: "Don't worry, bro, you are also gonna sit with your sister."

She went to sit on his lap. And Xolisa sat with Sihle.

Sthandiwe told them everything about Mason, Ethan and Reneé. They were all impressed and happy that everything was over. But Sthandiwe knew that it wasn't over yet but she kept that to herself. Chris came with the champagne and they all celebrated the victory. They sat there chatting and laughing. Just enjoying each other's company. Until Sthandiwe stopped them, wanting to say something.

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-Sthandiwe: "Okay, y'all still remember that you saved my life, right?"

-Sihle: "And you thanked us for it."

-Sthandiwe: "And there's a little more that I'd like to give each and everyone of you. Just to say thanks once again."

She went inside to get her suitcase and took out the gift boxes. She put them all on the table.

-Palesa: "Gifts? Oh wow, I love gifts."

-Xolisa: (to Sthandiwe) "But, buddy, you didn't have to."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Shut up, will you?"

-KG: "I'm probably the dumbest person here, but I think I know basic Math...I see only 4 gift boxes here but there's 5 of us."

-Chris: "You're the smartest because you've noticed that and I haven't."

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, please, just keep quiet. I'm the only one who's allowed to speak now."

They all kept quiet.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'm gonna start with you, baby. This is yours... It's nothing much but I know that you wanted it."

She gave him his box. It was a small box. He opened it and a huge smile immediately took over his face.

-Chris: "Wow, sthandwa sam, thank you. I really wanted this."

He went to hug her and gave her a baby kiss.

-Palesa: "What is it? Let us see."

He showed it to them. It was the watch Sthandiwe had bought from Elite Watches - a Bell & Ross BR01-92 Airborne 415.

-Xolisa: "Wow, how much did that cost?"

-Sthandiwe: "Like I said, it's nothing big but I bought it because I knew that he always wanted it. It didn't cost much as compared to other watches out there. It was +300K."

-KG: "And you say that's not much? Come on."

-Sihle: "A watch says a lot about a man. Who he is, where he's going..."

-KG: "And who he's dating."

They all laughed.

-Palesa: "Okay, go on, Thandi, I want to see what you got for me."

-Sthandiwe: "Next up is Sihle. You really could use this, chomi."

She handed another small box to her. She opened it and inside was a car key. A key for that BMW 328i Sthandiwe had just bought. Sihle screamed in excitement. And jumped to hug her.

-Sihle: "A car? Oh my God, chomi."

-Sthandiwe: "BMW 328i. Paid in full. It's not brand new but it was a dealership demo so it's still in a very good condition. You needed your own car and to stop sharing with Muzi. When he's using the car, you were forced to use taxis. But not anymore."

-Sihle: "I don't believe this. Thank you so much, chomi."

-Xolisa: "That's the same car that we went to pick up from the dealership yesterday, right? But why didn't you tell me that you had bought it for Sihle?"

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't trust that you were not gonna tell her. I wanted it to be a surprise."

Xolisa just smiled and shook his head. Sihle was still in disbelief, so excited.

-Sthandiwe: "Now, moving on to you, bro. KG. Here's yours."

It was the biggest box that was there, A4 size. She handed it to him. Surprisingly, it was big but light in weight. He opened it and found an A4 envelope inside.

-KG: "Papers? You can't divorce me as your brother, right?"

Everyone laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "No, man, just open it."

He did and inside was his job appointment letter. The one Sthandiwe got from Thumeka.

-KG: (shocked and excited) "Is this what I think it is? A job?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yep, I pulled some strings and got you a job that you are qualified for. They didn't even see the need to follow procedure and call you for an interview, I mean they knew they were gonna take you anyway...I got your resume from MaKhumalo and I asked her not to tell you about it. I wanted to surprise you."

-KG: "Wow. Thank you, gazi. And the salary is more than double what I'm getting now. This is big, ST. Amazing."

They shared their unique handshake then hugged. Everyone cheered.

-Palesa: "Okay, there's only one box left on the table and there's two of us. So who does it belong to?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's yours, Lisa. I know that you always wanted these. So, here you go."

She gave the box to her. It was the smallest of all but its contents were the most expensive. She opened it and screamed her lungs out in excitement.

-Palesa: "The Golconda diamond earrings. I always wanted these. But I knew that I could never afford them."

-Sthandiwe: "You went crazy when you saw them on my mother 4 years ago. And now they are yours. I'm sure my mother would also be glad to know that they ended up being taken by you. She liked you."

-Palesa: "That woman had style. Just like moi. Thank you, chomi."

She hugged her.

-Xolisa: "Oh, so I'm the one who's not gonna get anything. I must say, I'm disappointed. Why though?"

-Sthandiwe: "Come on, buddy, who said you won't get anything? I didn't put your gift in a box because it's too big to fit into one."

-Xolisa: "Oh? What is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "You'll find out soon enough. Just lemme make a phone call."

She took her phone and called someone.

-Sthandiwe: (into the phone) "You can come up now."

She hung up and looked at Chris.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, you have visitors. Please let them in."

The visitors were already hitting the intercom. Chris went to let them in. Everyone was curious to see who the visitors were, so they all left the balcony and went inside. Sthandiwe's PI walked in with a 26-year-old woman.

-Sthandiwe: "Xolisa, that's your gift. Your long lost sister."

-Xolisa: (shocked) "Minnie?"

He rushed up to her and pulled her in an embrace.

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After having dinner at that Italian restaurant, the friends got into Chris' car and he went to leave them at the hotel then drove back to his apartment with his new fiancée. On the way, Sthandiwe kept admiring her ring. The whole thing was still surreal.

As soon as they walked inside the apartment, Chris quickly took off his jacket and threw it on the couch. Then grabbed Sthandiwe's arm and pulled her to him, pinning her body to his, and smashed his lips on hers. They kissed, a long passionate kiss. Then he pulled back, smiling.

-Chris: "I've been wanting to do this the entire evening but you know how your friends are."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, they're your friends too."

-Chris: "I know...You've really made me the happiest man tonight, MamTshawe. Thank you for saying yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you had me with that song. I wasn't gonna say no. I love you, Chris. So much. And I can't wait to marry you."

He smiled then kissed her again. This time, he lifted her off the ground and carried her to the bedroom, their lips still joined. He gently put her on the bed, kicked off his shoes and got on top of her, kissing her. Just as the kiss was getting more heated, he pulled back and sat on the bed. Okay, what was that about?

-Sthandiwe: "And then?"

-Chris: "Please sit up straight."

Okay, whatever he was going to say seemed serious and it scared Sthandiwe. She did as he requested then looked at him, anxious to hear what he wanted to say.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, I'd like you to be open-minded about what I'm about to say to you. Please."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, you're scaring me now. What's up?"

-Chris: "Wait, I'll be right back."

He went to the en-suite bathroom and came back with a small, brown paper bag. He took its contents out. And when Sthandiwe saw what they were, her eyes widened, she wasn't expecting that.

-Sthandiwe: "HIV test kits?"

-Chris: "Yes, I got them from the Med Centre I work at. I want us to know our statuses."

But couldn't he have waited and bring the subject up in the morning? Seriously, the timing was bad. Ugh, what a mood killer.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, okay...that's...that's okay."

For the first time, it was registering to her that she actually never used protection with Alizwa. And that made her nervous.

-Chris: "Perfect. So let's do this."

He took out the four test strips. Two were for him and two were for Sthandiwe. He pricked himself and dropped the blood on his two test strips, then that solution. Sthandiwe did the same for herself. Then they put the strips separately on the nightstand. As they waited, Sthandiwe was now realising how stupid, reckless and irresponsible she had been by sleeping with Alizwa without protection. That's how fucked up most of us are, we act without thinking then be afraid of the consequences later. That's really fucked up.

When the time came, they checked and they were all negative. That was a relief for Chris but not so much for Sthandiwe because she knew that the window period wasn't really over. Without saying a word, she took off her shoes then walked over to the dressing table. She took off her earrings then took her handbag and made her way to the bathroom.

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She went to stand in front of the mirror and removed her makeup. Just as she was finishing, Chris walked in.

-Chris: "Hey, are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I'm fine."

She didn't seem fine though. But it wasn't about what he had just done, she understood why he had to do it, it was about her. She was kicking herself inside, regretting what she did with Alizwa.

Chris walked over to her and hugged her from behind. He spoke looking at the her in the mirror.

-Chris: "I love you, Thandi. You know that, right? Baby, even if the results were positive I would love you still. Nothing was gonna change... Like I said in that song, nothing would ever scare me away from you."

He planted wet kisses on her neck. She was just standing there, staring at the mirror, not really in the mood.

-Chris: "Ndiyakuthanda, sthandwa sam [I love you, my love]"

He whispered that to her ear with his bedroom low seductive voice. She could feel his warm breath on her skin, and to her that was an aphrodisiac. He turned her around and kissed her with his soft lips. He deepened the kiss making her lose herself to him, she was completely back in the mood now. As their tongues danced in each others mouths, Chris undid the zip of her dress and gently took it off. She got out of it but didn't afford him the same courtesy, she literally ripped his shirt off, peeled it from his body and dropped it to the floor. He too felt the urgency to get rid of his pants. He dropped them to the floor and got out of them just as Sthandiwe was also dropping her bra.

Both naked now, he lifted her up again and took her back to the bedroom, still kissing. He put her on the bed and continued kissing her. He kissed her neck, leaving hickeys as he went down to her nipples and sucked on them. She moaned in pleasure and silently, she was like "please go down." As if he heard her, he continued down with his wet kisses. As soon as he got below her belly button, he got up and ripped her panties off. He spread her legs apart and began with kissing her inner thighs before moving to her shaven honeypot. He kissed it before going in with his tongue. She was already dripping wet and that excited him more. He stuck his tongue in and let it do its magic inside her, while his hand was playing with her clit. She grabbed his head and pushed him deeper. Her soft moans were now getting loud and she couldn't hold it in anymore. She grabbed on the sheets as she came inside his mouth. He licked her clean then went up to her mouth, making her taste her own juices. She could feel his hard shaft rubbing against her and she couldn't wait to feel it inside her. She whispered between the kisses.

-Sthandiwe: "Give...it...to me, babe."

He complied. He rubbed it against her wet entrance then slowly slid it inside, no condom this time. She gasped, feeling a sensation she had never felt with him before. He started slowly, with her letting out soft pleasure moans. But as he increased the pace, her moans grew louder in sweet pain. They tensed as they both came at the same time. They caught their breaths, then got back at it again. This time she got on top of him and rode him like there was no tomorrow. After that round, it was another then another, and she was giving it all to him, the entire 360°

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At the hotel. KG took a cold shower then went to sit on the bed. He couldn't sleep, thinking about Palesa. He decided to take his phone and call her. She answered almost immediately.

-Palesa: "Kagiso."

-KG: "Hey. What are you up to?"

-Palesa: "I just had a shower and I'm about to get under covers. You?"

-KG: "Same here but I can't sleep. Can I come over?"

He could hear that she was smiling at the sound of that.

-Palesa: "I'd love that."

That was it for him. He hung up and quickly put on his shorts, a T-shirt and slides. Then he left his room to Palesa's, just down the corridor.

The night Sthandiwe gave him Palesa's number he called her and they talked for hours before they fell asleep. The next day after the installation of the cameras at Sthandiwe's house, he left in a hurry just to meet up with her. They met for an hour of drinks. And they did the same thing the next day. They really clicked, that's why they were all so cosy and comfortable with each other in the car on the way from the airport. But KG hadn't told her how he felt yet. And tonight was the night.

He knocked on her door and she opened for him wearing nothing but a robe. KG walked in, already drooling.

-KG: "Wow, you look...ummh, I mean I wasn't expecting to find you..."

-Palesa: "I know, KG."

-KG: "Ugh, what am I saying? You just walked out of the shower, so it's expected that you be in a bathrobe."

-Palesa: "No, Kagiso, I mean I know that you like me. And truth is, I like you too."

Okay, KG wasn't expecting that.

-KG: "You do?"

-Palesa: "I can't lie or hide it anymore. I'm really losing will to try. And waiting for you to say something, well...I couldn't do that either. So come on, tiger, go on, kiss me and leave me breathless."

She said that taking a step back... What? This was KG she was talking to, her wish was his command. He stepped closer to her but she stepped back again. Then pulled on the robe cinch and it loosened. The robe fell on the floor, and she was wearing nothing underneath, no undies, she sure was ready for him. KG swallowed as he took in her naked, juicy body. He stepped closer and attacked her with a kiss then swept her up into his arms and took her to the bed. He quickly took off his clothes and got on top of her. And they got to it. He dived in. Fingertips caressed. Lips hovered, then sensuously kissed flesh. The moist lips would meet and part, creating a bridge of their juices. Sweat gathered, then rolled languorously across taut skin. Fingers entwined, released, tightened. Palesa gasped. KG tensed. The moment arrived at once for the both of them. Then they fell asleep in each others arms.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe opened her eyes feeling that someone was staring at her. As soon as she opened them, her eyes met her man's. He smiled.

-Chris: "Morning, beautiful."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Hey. Why were you staring at me?"

-Chris: "I thought you know by now that I love to watch you when you're sleeping. So beautiful and innocent. No sight beats that."

-Sthandiwe: "You're so cheesy and I like it."

He chuckled. And pointed to a tray on the nightstand.

-Chris: "I've made you breakfast. No eggs, because even though you stopped using those anti-inflammatory I don't know how the new ones are treating you."

-Sthamdiwe: "I still feel nauseated sometimes. And I still have some food aversions...Thanks for the breakfast. Now lemme go brush my teeth."

But he stopped her.

-Chris: "When are you gonna stop taking them?"

-Sthandiwe: "Soon. My ribs are healing just fine. I mean you saw it for yourself last night, I didn't get distracted by pain."

He grinned.

-Chris: "Yeah, I noticed."

-Sthandiwe: "What about you? When are you gonna take that hand brace off? I really want to feel the touch of both of your hands on my body."

-Chris: "Ugh, it's still gonna be here for another month or so."

-Sthandiwe: "Sucks. And that gap? I know you told me that you went to see a dentist but you didn't tell me the full details."

-Chris: "Yeah, I did. And he told me that I have some bone loss and I'm gonna have to have bone graft done first. I actually have an appointment for that this coming Tuesday. Then after that is done, he said I'm gonna have to wait for 2 to 3 months to have an implant."

-Sthandiwe: "Yoh, they better hurry up, you can't enjoy the festive season with that gap. It's not sexy."

She said that laughing.

-Chris: "Oh, you're making fun of me?"

He started tickling her. She laughed hard as she tried to stop him.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, my...my ribs."

But he wasn't stopping. She managed to get away and ran into the bathroom. She locked the door, and noticed that the clothes that they had left on the floor the previous night were gone, Chris had picked them up. She started brushing her teeth and felt nauseated immediately but she didn't throw up. She finished then washed her hands. When she came out, Chris had already made the bed. She got her robe out of her suitcase and put it on. Then went to sit with Chris on the bed and they had their breakfast over a light conversation. After that, Chris went to put the plates in the kitchen, came back and wanted them to take a shower together. But she wasn't keen. She knew what would happen in there and she didn't want that, she wasn't in the mood, still recovering from the previous night's steamy sessions. So he went in alone while she went to stand in the bedroom balcony to enjoy the morning breeze from the ocean.

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She stood there, leaning against the glass rail, eyes closed, enjoying the breeze as it brushed against her face. But as she was still enjoying the moment, she got disturbed by the ringing of her phone. She took it from the chair that was there and checked the caller ID - Alizwa. Ugh. But she answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hi."

-Alizwa: "Hey. How are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. Are you?"

-Alizwa: "I am, thanks...Reneé got arrested yesterday."

She didn't act shocked at all.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh."

-Alizwa: "They have evidence connecting her to some sex trafficking syndicate. Something I didn't know about. They also have a footage putting her in that warehouse in Booyens and they found illegal guns in her home safe. But of course, you already know all of this. You were behind it. Putting those guns in her safe is what you wanted to do in her house on Friday. And I'm sure those are the same guns we used to kill those guys in Booyens."

-Sthandiwe: "So, what are you saying? Why are you telling me all this? Listen, Alizwa, your ex-wife or girlfriend, or whatever the hell she is to you, is a psychotic bitch. She deserves to rot in jail. If you feel sorry for her then go and post her bail after her bail hearing. But be sure not to step on my toe because you won't like my reaction."

She said all of that calmly but it sure sounded like a threat.

-Alizwa: "No, there's a misunderstanding here. That's not why I called. I'm actually glad Reneé is behind bars. I can't believe she's been lying to me all these years. The things she was involved in. The woman's deep. I'm glad I'm rid of her. I hope she goes to prison for a very long time."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh?"

-Alizwa: "Yeah. And good thinking, Thandi. You did a great job."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure... And hey, Al, I've been meaning to ask. When I was there the other day you said Ted's dead. How did he die?"

-Alizwa: "Heart attack. He actually got buried on Monday but I couldn't attend his funeral. And his wife also found out that he was actually keeping secrets from her. She called me mad as hell, asking why I never told her about what Ted was doing behind her back. I hate it when that happens. That's why I'm not going to do it to you. I know you knew about Reneé's side operations but I'm not gonna ask why you didn't tell me."

Sthandiwe wasn't really interested in what he was saying, she was only interested in the first part of his paragraph. And now that she had heard it, she was pleased, things really went the way she wanted them to.

-Alizwa: "Here's another reason why I called: I want to tell you why I was at your house yesterday morning. I was there because I wanted to ask..."

But she cut him off because she could hear that Chris was back in the bedroom and the glass sliding door leading to the balcony was opened. She didn't want him to hear her talking to Alizwa, she knew that he wouldn't like it.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, I'm sorry but I gotta go."

She hung up just like that. And just as she hung up, a call from Cole came through. She answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey you."

-Cole: "Hey, how's it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Good, good. You?"

-Cole: "Good. I meant to call you yesterday but I just got too busy. Listen, Tee, something bad happened at that party on Friday. Paul actually died. Have you heard?"

She acted shocked.

-Sthandiwe: "What? No. What happened to him? I haven't heard anything."

-Cole: "It looks like he got poisoned at the party. He started getting sick right there at the party, and he was rushed to hospital. Early hours of the morning yesterday, things got worse. The doctors tried to revive him but he flat-lined... It's not yet known who did it but the guy had multiple enemies. And Heather actually thinks it's one of them who had him poisoned."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh gosh, that's just hectic. And sad."

-Cole: "It is. And now Heather thinks she's also not safe here. So she's moving to New Zealand. She actually got a job offer there two weeks ago but she hadn't accepted it yet when this thing happened. She applied for the job months ago before we got together and now that I'm in her life she was thinking of turning it down, but this thing with her father happened so she's taking the job. She wants to be far away from here as possible and she doesn't want to work in her father's business anymore. She's leaving and I'm going with her."

-Sthandiwe: "Wow. That's a huge step, bro. So when are you guys leaving?"

-Cole: "As soon as our papers get ready. That's why I wanted you to know."

-Sthandiwe: "I understand. Thanks for letting me know, buddy. Hope things work out for you two over there."

-Cole: "Me too."

They hung up. Sthandiwe was actually relieved that he was leaving because she didn't know how she was going to look at him again knowing that she used him to get to Mason.

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Chris came out to stand next to her and pecked her lips.

-Sthandiwe: "You have magnificent sea views here. I could really get used to this. Phela we don't have all this in Jo'burg."

-Chris: "You'll get used to it 'cause you're moving in this December."

-Sthandiwe: "Moving in with you?"

He nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, babe, but you're dreaming. Yes, I'm moving here but I'm not moving in with you. We're not married yet so I would never do that. BB would wake up from the dead if I could do that. That's not how he raised me. Cohabiting is a no, no. I'm gonna have to look for an apartment around here. I actually like this neighbourhood."

-Chris: "That's cool. As long as you're gonna be near me, I'm cool...So when are we setting the date for the wedding?"

-Sthandiwe: "Wedding date? Baby, we just got engaged, as in yesterday. And you're gonna have to pay lobola [dowry] before we set a date. We're black, Chris, that's how we do things. We have to do things properly. I'm sure Chris Senior would agree with me."

-Chris: "Yeah, he would. My dad is a traditional man and so am I. It's just that..."

He stopped and let out a silly smile, meaning whatever he was about to say was silly.

-Chris: "It's just that I didn't think mixed race people want lobola. Technically, you're not black, baby."

He laughed. Sthandiwe punched him playfully.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, don't say that. Look, I'm proud of who and what I am. I wouldn't change the person I am even if I could. I'm a product of two people who loved each other so dearly even though they didn't belong in the same race. And that to me is amazing. Hence, I'm proud of who I am. But hey, let's face it, I am what my father was, which is umXhosa. As you can see, I'm Sthandiwe Blie, that's Xhosa."

-Chris: "Blie. Is Blie even a Blacks surname?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course. All the Blies I know in SA are Xhosa. Don't ask me how that came about generations and generations ago. All I know is, it is a surname for Blacks."

He grinned.

-Chris: "But I don't like it. I'm glad you're gonna lose it soon. Sthandiwe Motaung is perfect. It has a nice ring to it."

-Sthandiwe: "Motaung? Nice ring?"

-Chris: "Yeah. Don't you like it?"

She eyed the open sliding door to the bedroom, thinking of running to it immediately after saying what she was about to say. She smiled then shook her head.

-Sthandiwe: "Motaung? Nah, I hate it, actually. Tau? [lion]. Imagine."

She was just teasing him and she knew he would want to tickle her again. So she quickly ran to the door, laughing. She got in and locked it behind her. She watched him as he stood there, begging him to open up. She just laughed at him, enjoying seeing him beg.

He breathed to the glass then used his index finger to draw a heart where he had breathed. Then he put his hand over his heart and mouthed the words "I love you." Her heart just melted. She also placed her hand over her heart and mouthed "I love you too." Then he motioned for her to open the door. She did.

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But as soon as he got in, he lifted her up and went to put her on the bed. He got on top of her.

-Chris: "Repeat what you just said out there. You were saying?"

He said that tickling her. She was laughing and running out of breath.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm...sorry."

He stopped and they ended up kissing. In no time they had lost their clothes and they were making love. After that they rested on the bed. Chris was lying on his tummy and Sthandiwe was right beside him. She noticed a new tattoo between his shoulder blades. His first tattoo. The double infinity symbols.

-Sthandiwe: "What, you have a tat?"

-Chris: "Didn't you see it last night? Actually, no don't answer that. I'm not surprised you didn't see it."

He laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "When did you do it?"

-Chris: "On Monday. And it itches like hell. It's still healing, I just stopped using the oil yesterday. I want it to be dry."

-Sthandiwe: "Infinity times infinity?"

-Chris: "That's how much you said you love me. You even used a pen to draw those symbols on my palm. Remember?"

-Sthandiwe: "I do. I just didn't know that you were gonna do a tattoo of them."

-Chris: "I did it because I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "And I love it."

They kissed. Then got up and went to the bathroom to take a shower, together this time. They got ready and went to pick up the others from the hotel.

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On the way.

-Sihle: "Hey, Chris, so where's this beach you're taking us to?"

-Chris: "Llandudno."

-Sihle: "La...what? I've never heard of such beach, not even once."

-Chris: "You don't live here, Sihle. So you wouldn't know all the places around here. Llandudno is one of the upmarket neighbourhoods of Cape Town. But its residents strive to maintain a private, coastal village feel to their suburb. You'll be surprised, there are no street lights, shops or commercial activities there."

-Xolisa: "Seriously, no street lights?"

-Chris: "I kid you not. But it's a very beautiful neighbourhood, picturesque. And its beach is one of the Cape's most beautiful beaches. You'll see it for yourself. But hey, the waves can be rough there and the water is extremely cold, so swimming can be treacherous."

-Palesa: "Then why are you taking us there? Bro, we want to swim, come on."

It was a really hot day and they were all dressed for the beach. Sihle and Palesa with their bikinis underneath their clothes.

-Chris: "I'm taking you to a house in Llandudno. There's someone, two someones actually, who want to meet all of you. So yah, after we meet with them we can all go to the beach. But if y'all don't like that beach I can take you to Sandy Bay."

He said the last part chuckling.

-Palesa: "But, bro, isn't Sandy Bay beach popular with nudists?"

-Chris: (laughing) "It is. Don't y'all want to go nude?"

They all just laughed, not into the idea.

-Sthandiwe: "You say people who want to see us? Who are they?"

-Chris: "It's just a friend of mine and his sister. Actually, he's an optometrist at the Med Centre where my office is at."

They got to the chic sophisticated mansion in Llandudno. Style and glamour at its best. They got out of the car and walked towards the house.

-Sihle: "Oh wow. Now this is what I call elegant, luxury living. How many people live here?"

-Chris: "Four. My friend Zach, his sister Claire and their parents. But their parents are not home now, they are away for the weekend." Just then, Zach (31) and Claire (28) walked out of the house to welcome them. They welcomed them warmly, then they took them to the back terrace with retractable glass walls, facing an enormous pool. They all chilled there over drinks and snacks, getting to know each other. Zach and Claire were actually pretty nice people. They were going to do a braai (BBQ) for them later, but first they all had to go to the beach. There was no way the Jo'burgers were going to leave Cape Town without going to the beach.

-Zach: "The waves can be rough there. But it's nice for surfing, which is what we normally go there for with Chris."

-KG: "What, Chris surfs?"

-Zach: "You don't know? This guy is into extreme sports."

-KG: "Nah, I didn't know. I just know that he's a biker."

Then he whispered to Sthandiwe.

-KG: "Guess he's not the soft pretty boy I thought he was then."

He laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, stop it."

She said that punching him playfully.

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They got to the beach and they all prepared to go in the water but not Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "You can go in, guys, but I won't. I want to stay dry."

-Chris: "Same here. Y'all go ahead, we'll just sit here."

They took off their slides and sat on the sand. The others braved the cold waters and went in. Chris and Sthandiwe just watched them enjoying themselves in the water. Really having fun.

-Sthandiwe: "They really look happy. Thanks for inviting us down here, babe. They really wanted this."

-Chris: "It was only a pleasure...Anyway, now that Mason is dead are you gonna buy your shares back in your father's company? I mean he's the reason why you sold them in the first place."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. But nah, I really don't want that company. I never wanted it. It's just not me. Yeah, I feel like I've let my father down but I gotta let go and do me."

-Chris: "I feel you. So what are you gonna do now that you've cashed out your share of the Blie fortune?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know yet. I'll probably donate some of the money then invest the rest. And we can also go on a holiday this December, together. Just you and me. You choose the destination."

-Chris: "Really?"

She nodded.

-Chris: "Then that has to be Hawaii. I've always wanted to go there."

-Sthandiwe: "Then Hawaii it is. I did go on a holiday there once. Years ago."

-Chris: "Oahu?"

-Sthandiwe: "Kauai. It's really beautiful. I'm talking staggering mountains and miles of sandy beaches, uncrowded beaches. We really had a great time there. But that was 9 years ago, when I was still doing my first year."

-Chris: "Nice. You went with your parents?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yep. And KG. We had just met that year but he was already my best buddy. It was before my kidnapping and my dad still liked him. In fact, both my parents were really fond of him."

-Chris: "You guys come so far together."

-Sthandiwe: "Me and KG? Hell, yeah. He's the brother I never had...Speaking of, I need to talk to him before I forget. I'll be right back."

She got up and called out for him, gesturing for him to come out of the water. He did and they went to talk privately.

-Sthandiwe: "I have something for you."

She took out a folded small paper out of the pocket of her bum shorts and opened it for him to see.

-KG: "A cheque? For me?"

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't want to give it to you in front of the others. You can pay off your car. Plus, I owe you for your guns."

-KG: "Nah, I can't accept that, ST. I mean, getting me a job was enough."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you deserve this. KG, I've come to you for help many times and you've never let me down. I've asked you to do crazy things and you always take my side. If right now I could say let's blow up one of those houses up there, your first question would be "Where's the C4?" The next "What's the plan?" The "why" would come later. That's how much you trust and support me. You've come through for me countless times. So come on, take this. It's my way of saying thank you and that I appreciate you."

He smiled.

-KG: "Alright then, I'll take it. Thanks, gazi. A lot. God knows I need that money."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for accepting it. But I'll hold on to it for now 'cause you're wet...Now tell me, did you talk to Palesa? I've noticed how you've been looking at each other today."

-KG: "Hey, I don't kiss and tell."

-Sthandiwe: "Kiss?"

But before he could say anything, they got disturbed by Xolisa arriving to them. He wrapped his arm around Sthandiwe.

-Xolisa: "Come on, let's go in. The water is cold but you'll get used to it."

-Sthandiwe: "He.e maan take your wet arm off of me."

She said that removing it. KG got a chance to escape her question. He literally ran away. Sthandiwe just laughed.

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Then she turned to Xolisa.

-Sthandiwe: "So, XO, when is your sister going back home?"

-Xolisa: "It's not that simple. She told me that she ran away because something bad happened."

-Sthandiwe: "What happened?"

-Xolisa: "You remember the uncle I told you, guys, about? The one that works for the JMPD."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. The one you got the vests from."

-Xolisa: "Yeah, that's the one. He's not really my uncle, he's just my father's old friend. They've been close friends for decades hence we now practically consider him family. Now here's the fucked up part: he raped Minnie?"

-Sthandiwe: "What?"

What Xolisa just said caused a quake somewhere inside her. She could feel each and every cell of her body filling with rage.

-Xolisa: "Yes. That's why she ran away from home 4 years ago. She couldn't stand to look at him acting all nice and holy in her own home. And she couldn't tell our parents because that asshole threatened her. And she also didn't want to cause a rift in the family. See, Minnie doesn't have a good record when it comes to men, so she thought no one would ever believe her. She thought they'd just take that guy's side, because he's a respectable family man. So yah, she still doesn't wanna go home because of those reasons."

-Sthandiwe: (angry) "I hate what you're saying, XO. I hate it. Who does the guy think he is?...You know, there are two kinds of people that I hate the most in this world. Liars and rapists. That jerk is gonna have to deal with me."

-Xolisa: "No, Thandi, what are you gonna do?"

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, no blood."

She said that already walking away, leaving Xolisa standing there, wondering.

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Back in Jo'burg. Reneé's lawyer, not Greg this time but a woman, arrived at the Booyens Police Station and wanted to see her client.

-Det. Shepherd: "Your client is gonna go to prison."

-The Lawyer: "Not if I can help it."

-Det. Shepherd: "I hope you're good because we have overwhelming evidence against her."

-The Lawyer: "Trust me, I am. Now let me see her."

Reneé was brought into the room by a uniformed cop. Detective Shepherd walked out, the other cop followed her out but waited outside by the door.

-Reneé: "You're not my lawyer."

-The Lawyer: (calmly) "Hello, Reneé."

-Reneé: "You people, really like doing this. You make sure that my lawyer doesn't show up then come in his place. But I'm not complaining. And I'm not even gonna ask who you are. But I'm definitely interested in how you're gonna get me out."

-The Lawyer: "You are in a very difficult position, Reneé. And your actions have put the other members of the ring in a very difficult position."

-Reneé: "Oh, is that all you care about? Where the hell were y'all when Mason was pushing me into doing something I didn't wanna do? If he didn't, I'm sure I wouldn't be in here today."

-The Lawyer: "Fact is, you're exposed, Reneé. And I'm sure you could understand the concern of the ring, that you may in fact expose the others as well."

-Reneé: "How can I do that? I don't know who they are? I don't even know who you are. I only dealt with Mason."

-The Lawyer: "You know enough. And now they need to be certain. I think we can agree that there's no reason for your father and your little half-sister to pay for your mistakes."

-Reneé: "Oh, is that why you're here? To threaten my family?"

-The Lawyer: "On the contrary, I came to guarantee their safety. If you do the right thing."

She put her hand in her pocket and came out with a pill. She discreetly showed it to her.

-The Lawyer: "It will induce a cardiac arrest and leave no trace in your system. A natural dignified death. With you and Mason dead, this case will go with the wind. It won't even make waves. Preserving at least some small part of the legacy you've tried to build. Which I know is very important to you."

-Reneé: "Oh, it's you, the fucking ring, that killed Mason? And you want to do the same to me now."

-The Lawyer: "We'd like to take the credit for his death but we didn't do it...Reneé, it's up to you, you know. A dignified death, or a publicised "suicide". Either way, you're not gonna stand on that stand in court. There won't be no trial. We won't be exposed by you. And if you want us to do this ourselves, trust me we'll also extend our hand to your family. And you don't want that."

Reneé thought about it, long and hard, then quickly took the pill.

-The Lawyer: "Good choice."

-Reneé: "Find Al. Tell him that I love him."

The lawyer just got up and walked out. Reneé was taken back to her holding cell.

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After spending the day at the beach, Sthandiwe and her friends went back to Zach's home. The guys got busy with the berbecue while the ladies were deep in the swimming pool, enjoying the water again. Sthandiwe was just taking pictures of them with her phone, capturing the happy moments. When the braai was ready they took it to the table under the terrace. The house help had served a lot of sides. They all sat down and ate. Good thing it was chicken, Sthandiwe had no problem with it, she ate it. They were really having fun with each other, and they got along with Zach and Claire just fine. But even at the beach, Claire seemed to be getting along more with Xolisa.

After eating, the house help came to clear the table. Then everyone started pestering Sthandiwe to sing.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you, guys, kidding me right now?"

-Sihle: "No, we're not. So come on, let's hear you sing."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, that's a closed chapter to me now. I'm a Doctor now so yah, I'm done with singing or doing music."

-Zach: "Hey, being a Doctor means nothing when it comes to doing what you love. Look at me, I'm an optometrist but I still DJ. It's my hobby and I would never abandon it."

-Claire: "And your girlfriend doesn't like it."

-Zach: "She'll accept it eventually."

-Sthandiwe: "Good for you, but as for me, I'm done with the music hobby."

-Palesa: "But you sang at Rato's party."

-Sthandiwe: "I had a reason for doing it. And that was before I officially became a Doctor...Three years ago I stopped doing music because I lost my father but now I'm stopping because I want to."

-Claire: "Okay, I have another idea. Let's play lip sync battle. We'll all do it and Lillian will be judge and tell us who the winner is. And that winner will take away R1000, out of my pocket."

Lillian was the house help.

They all liked the idea. They got inside in the family room, played the music and started the battle. All 8 of them got their chance but Lillian chose KG as the winner. Guess she liked all his craziness and matching dance moves. Claire didn't hesitate, she gave him the money in cash. The whole thing was just fun. They were just fooling around, letting loose. Then up next it was karaoke, Zach's idea, saying his parents usually have karaoke nights with their friends. They all agreed to it. But this time they were going to do it in pairs. And the winning pair was also going to take away R1000, from Zach's pocket this time. Sthandiwe paired up with Chris. Zach with Sihle. Xolisa with Claire. And KG with Palesa.

Zach came with his mother's karaoke machine and they got to it. Again, Lillian favoured KG...and his partner, Palesa.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, this is not fair. KG again?"

He just laughed as he counted his money.

-KG: "I don't know about you and your complaining, sis. But me and my baby here, we are now R2000 richer."

He said that kissing Palesa's cheek.

-Chris: "Baby? I thought I saw you two being all touchy feely down at the beach but I thought I was seeing things."

-Palesa: "You were not. KG and I are in a relationship. So y'all can consider this us coming out to you."

KG looked at her, shocked that she said "relationship". They hadn't talked about no relationship, but he liked it.

Chris wanted to say more but Sthandiwe closed his mouth with her hand.

-Sthandiwe: "Just be happy for them, babe."

He let it go. Others were happy for them.

They all continued playing other games until Chris and Sthandiwe wanted to go back to their apartment. It was time anyway, it was just before 20:00. But the others wanted to go out and party. Wanting to experience Cape Town's nightlife before heading back to Jo'burg the following day. Zach offered to take them to a club that he usually DJ'ed in, in Cape Town downtown. They got to his car and left. Chris and Sthandiwe drove back to their apartment. They were really starting to get bored of being with other people, they couldn't wait to be alone and explore each other's bodies again. Indeed, they walked inside

their apartment already kissing. And they had it right there on the couch then on the kitchen counter before moving to the bedroom.

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In René's holding cell. She sat at the corner and took out that pill. She knew that in order for her father and half-sister to be safe she had to take it before her bail hearing. The hearing was going to be on Monday, the following day. She looked at the pill, afraid to take it. But there was no other way, she had dug her own grave the day she agreed to work for Mason. And she found the hard way that getting into that kind of business is easier than getting out.

Her father's words, telling her how disappointed he was in her, kept playing in her head. She knew that ending her life this way would also avoid tainting her father's reputation. So she ended up throwing the pill in her mouth.

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In the morning, it was Chris' turn to sleep as Sthandiwe studied him. But when he felt the stare his eyes opened. Sthandiwe didn't say anything, no good morning, she just welcomed him to the new day with a smile. He smiled too.

-Chris: "Waking up to this smile every morning is all I want."

-Sthandiwe: "Get the cows ready and it's gonna happen. Did you sleep well?"

-Chris: "Of course. Every night with you, sthandwa sam, is an amazing night."

She smiled.

-Sthandiwe: "It's now just before 7 and it's Monday. Aren't you going to work?"

-Chris: "Nope. Last week I cancelled all my appointments for today. What I want is to stay indoors with you the whole day."

-Sthandiwe: "I love the sound of that. But we're gonna have to take our friends to the airport first."

-Chris: "Yeah. And after that it's gonna be just you and me."

He pulled her closer to him and kissed her forehead.

-Chris: "I really want to hold you close like this every night and wake up next to you every morning."

-Sthandiwe: "Is that why you proposed?"

-Chris: "Isn't it obvious? I love you and I want you close to me all the time. And now that it's happening I couldn't be happier."

Then he attempted to sing.

"Would you mind if I still loved you?

Would you mind if things don't last?

Would you mind if I hold onto

You so that I won't crash?"

Sthandiwe just burst into laughter.

-Chris: "What, am I that bad?"

-Sthandiwe: "Terrible. Actually, you'd be the best Idols SA wooden mic contestant."

-Chris: (laughing) "I know. That's why I never sing."

-Sthandiwe: "But now you just had to sing Usher's song because?"

-Chris: "Because it's a song I heard you sing in Rato's party. I had just arrived at home and your voice drew me to the back yard. I saw you sing and I just stood there like a fool, frozen. How I wished to God you were singing those words to me. 'Cause I still loved you. But we had broken up and you were with another man...When you were done, you saw me and our eyes locked. I could feel my heart skip a beat, I wanted to run up to you and tell you that I still loved you and that I wanted your thing with HIM to not last but I didn't wanna make a fool of myself, I didn't wanna get hurt again. You were moving on with your life. And that...it was just a song. Usher's song."

Sthandiwe was now looking down.

-Sthandiwe: "I am and forever will be sorry for what I did to you, babe. I'm really sorry and I promise, I'd never ever hurt you like that again."

-Chris: "It's okay. I doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that we got past it. We are here now and this is all I ever wanted."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm lucky to have you."

-Chris: "No, I'm the lucky one...Now let's go take a shower. Their flight departs at 10:00."

-Sthandiwe: "Right behind you."

He got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom, singing "Crash" again.

"And I really, really, wanna love you

And I'm really, really only yours

Even if it don't last forever, I wanna let you know

We really had something special, it's hard tryna let it go

I'm just being honest, I'm still in the moment."

Sthandiwe remained in bed. Ashamed. Thinking about what she did to Chris and how he must have really felt then, especially that day.

She got back to reality and quickly got out of bed and ran into the bathroom when she felt the urge to throw up. She went to crouch in front of the toilet seat ready to do her business but it wasn't happening. It was just nausea. She looked at Chris and he wasn't seeing her because of all the steam inside the shower. She got up and went to brush her teeth. Then joined him in the shower.

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After getting dressed and everything, they made the bed together then went to make breakfast. As they sat at the kitchen counter eating, a message came through on Chris' phone. He read it then smiled and chuckled. Sthandiwe could feel a hint of jealousy inside her.

-Sthandiwe: "Must be a nice message, huh."

-Chris: "Nah, it's just a stupid message from Zach."

-Sthandiwe: "Can I see it?"

He didn't hesitate, he gave the phone to her. She saw the message, it was indeed from Zach "Why aren't you in your office yet? I bet you're still under covers with that hot fiancée of yours. Oh, by the way, I approve. She's really great. I like her."

She felt foolish for not trusting him. She gave the phone back.

-Sthandiwe: "Your friend though. But he's sweet. I think I like him too."

-Chris: "He's crazy. That's what he is."

Sthandiwe laughed as she got up and went to wash the plates. As she was still busy at the sink, a message came through on her phone. It was on the counter where she was sitting, next to Chris. Thinking it was one of her friends at the hotel, Chris wanted to see it, thinking that maybe they were already panicking. The phone had no lock pattern so he opened the message and read it. But it was from Alizwa, saying "I won't stop hoping that you'll come back to me until you do. I love you, Thandi, and you love me too. You know you do, please stop fighting it. Al."

He could feel his anger building up, not angry at Sthandiwe but at Alizwa. He closed the message and put the phone back. When Sthandiwe was done with the plates she went back to him.

-Sthandiwe: "Let's go, I'm sure they are waiting for us."

-Chris: "Could you please sit down for a sec?"

She sat.

-Chris: "I know that I shouldn't have done this, and I'm sorry. I assure you, it won't happen again."

-Sthandiwe: "What are you talking about?"

-Chris: "A message just came through on your phone and I read it. I'm sorry, I only read it because I thought it was from one of your friends. But actually it's from Alizwa. Tell me, do you still communicate with him? Please be honest with me."

He asked calmly. Sthandiwe didn't see a reason to be angry at him for reading the message, because he was apologising and he had just given her his phone with no hesitation.

-Sthandiwe: "Can I just read the message first?"

-Chris: "No, how about you answer me first?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, I communicated with him in the past few days. But only because I wanted him to help me with this Renéé thing. And now that it's over, him and I have nothing to talk about. This is the honest truth, babe, I swear."

-Chris: "I asked you this question before but I'm gonna ask you again. Do you still love him?"

-Sthandiwe: "What? No. That chapter of my life is long closed. Otherwise I wouldn't have accepted your proposal."

-Chris: "Then why does he think you still love him?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because he's delusional. He's seeing what he wants to see."

Chris was just looking at her, studying her eyes.

-Sthandiwe: "This is the truth, Chris."

Then she told him about the song and everything.

-Sthandiwe: "I told him to leave me alone. I did."

-Chris: "I believe you. But please make it clear to him again that he should stay away. Deal with him before I lose my mind and do something irrational. What he's doing ake e rate hohang. [I don't like it at all]"

He grabbed his keys and walked to the door. Sthandiwe followed him.

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They got to the hotel and found Xolisa and the others still not ready. They had overslept because they had a rough night, partying.

When they were done, Chris drove them to the airport. Sthandiwe gave KG the cheque, his car keys and the remotes for the gate and the garage door for the house in Hyde Park, so he could get his car out. Then they all shared some hugs and fist bumps before saying their goodbyes and went to board their flight. It was a Monday and Palesa was supposed to be at work but she had called in sick. Others were safe because it was the September break, schools and varsities were closed.

After that Chris and Sthandiwe drove back home. But before getting home they passed by KFC for a bucket of hot wings that Sthandiwe was craving. Then they went to Chris' favourite Chinese restaurant in Sea Point and got some takeouts then drove home. They got to the apartment and Sthandiwe went to change into something more comfortable - Chris' T-shirt. Then they went to sit in the lounge, ready to watch some movies.

-Chris: "Can I just watch some news first?"

-Sthandiwe: "Please don't. I don't like news."

-Chris: "But you used to like watching news. What's changed?"

-Sthandiwe: "That was before I started this fight with Reneé and everybody else. Now I avoid news, on TV or on a newspaper. I don't wanna see or hear about some of my handiwork."

-Chris: "Just like what happened in Booyens, it made it in the paper in Jo'burg. And I got a confirmation about Mason's death on the news yesterday morning before you woke up. But they said nothing about the poisoning, they just talked about a 'short illness'. Truth always gets twisted, I guess."

-Sthandiwe: "Exactly what I don't wanna see or hear...Anyway, should I choose a movie?"

-Chris: "I know you with your Musicals and romcoms. But it's okay, go ahead."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, we have all day to watch these movies. So let's cater for you first."

-Chris: "Okay then. You know me, I'm all about Adventure or Thriller-Suspense. So choose one in those genres. I'll be back with the popcorns."

He went to the kitchen. Sthandiwe went through the movies, looking for the right one as she feasted on her hot wings. As she was still busy, a message from her PI came through. He was telling her that he had enough information about Greg and that they should meet up in his office the following day. She read it then closed it, not knowing how she was going to tell Chris that she was going to have to go back to Jo'burg the following day. She had told him that she was going to stick around for the whole week and she didn't want him to know about Greg or what she wanted to do to him, afraid that he wouldn't approve.

He came back with the popcorns and Sthandiwe didn't say anything, they just watched the movie she had picked. Half way through it, a call came through on her phone. It was the detective from the Brixton Police Station, the one she had given her statement to about the intruder she had killed in her house. He was telling her that he had called her the day before but only reached her voicemail (she had switched her phone off when they were at the beach), and that he wanted to tell her that they had identified that intruder as Ethan Parker. And also added that he'd want to talk to her again, but only on Friday because he was going to be off duty until then. She told him that she'd be there. After

hanging up she lied to Chris and told him that the police wanted to see him the following day - she had just gotten a reason to leave. He was disappointed that she had to leave but he understood.

-Chris: "Make sure you continue with your therapy sessions when you get there, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course. I find therapy....umh therapeutic. So yeah, I'll continue."

But inside she was like "It's good and all but I ain't continuing with it. The only therapy I need is to look the guy who raped me in the eye and deal with him."

-Sthandiwe: "Can I use your laptop? I need to check flights for tomorrow."

-Chris: "Sure. It's in my office."

She got up and went to his home office.

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As she was still looking for the flight, Alizwa called. His number was no longer saved on her phone but she knew it by heart. She didn't answer, she let it ring. He called again and again until she decided to answer.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, please, I'd appreciate it if you could stop calling and messaging me."

-Alizwa: "Oh, hello to you too."

-Sthandiwe: "I mean it, Alizwa."

-Alizwa: "I'm calling to tell you that Reneé is dead. They've found her dead in her cell this morning."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "What? But how?"

-Alizwa: "They are still not sure how it happened but they think it was a natural death. She was alone in the cell and apparently there are no signs of foul play."

-Sthandiwe: "No. No. No. This is not right."

-Alizwa: "What do you mean it's not right? After everything she has put you through?"

She didn't answer that. She just said:

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for letting me know... I gotta go."

She hung up. The whole thing was upsetting her. She called out for Chris, more like yelling. Chris heard the yells and ran to the office, thinking there was something wrong. He found her standing by the desk, leaning on it with her face buried in her hands.

-Chris: "Baby? Is everything okay?"

She looked up.

-Sthandiwe: "Reneé's dead. Apparently, she was found dead in her cell this morning. And the death seems to be natural."

-Chris: "O-kay, is that it? I thought there was something wrong?"

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean? This is wrong, Chris."

-Chris: "Wrong how? That psycho deserved to die, Thandi. You should be relieved. Happy. She's gone for good, babe. Now we'll have some peace."

-Sthandiwe: "No, Chris. Death is a mercy. And she didn't deserve mercy. She deserved to suffer behind bars for years."

-Chris: "Okay, I get where you're coming from. But, sthandwa sam, it's done now. Yes, it's not what you wanted but it's still a win."

She calmed herself down.

-Sthandiwe: "I guess you're right."

-Chris: "I know I am."

He hugged her. Then she continued with what she was doing. She booked her flight then went back to the lounge.

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They resumed their movie. Then watched others after it. They just had a lazy day, chilling indoors. And it was fun.

After the movies Chris wanted them to play some games on his PS4.

-Sthandiwe: "But I'm only used to Xbox 360. Don't you have it?"

-Chris: "Clearly, you are no gamer, babe. If you were, you'd know that PS4 is way better than that Xbox. I have it, but I keep it in the cupboard. I stopped using it a while ago. It's crap."

So PS4 it was. They played, having fun until a call from Xolisa disturbed them. Chris didn't want her to answer it. So she ignored it and they continued with their game. But Xolisa called again.

-Sthandiwe: "No, babe, this seems important. I gotta take it."

She put her joystick aside and answered the call.

-Sthandiwe: "XO. What's up?"

-Xolisa: (hysterical) "Thandi, listen to me. I think Minnie has done something stupid. She just sent me a message that read like a goodbye."

He was talking fast, really freaked out.

-Sthandiwe: "Whoa! Slow down, Xolisa. What does the message say?"

-Xolisa: "Thandi, you're wasting time...She says talking to me about what happened to her has opened old wounds that were already healing. And that she can't live with that pain again. I think she wants to commit suicide or she has already done it by now. So, please, Thandi, please go to her place and see if she's okay. If I were there I'd go myself but I'm too far."

-Sthandiwe: (getting up) "Okay, don't stress, XO. Chris and I will be on our way there right now. I'll call you as soon as we get to her."

Chris was now looking at her, seeing that something's definitely wrong.

-Xolisa: "Do you know her address?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, don't worry about it."

She hung and told Chris what was going on. They both rushed to the bedroom, changed into more appropriate clothes and hurried to the car. Sthandiwe's photographic memory still remembered Minenhle's address from the file she got from the PI. She told Chris where it was and he knew that street in Mowbray, so they didn't need the GPS. He hit the gas, driving like a madman.

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In less than 30 minutes, around 19:00, they were in Mowbray. Chris' car skid to an angled stop before the gate of the house Minenhle was staying in. Sthandiwe leaped from the car, leaving the door agape behind her. She rushed to the intercom and hit it. Stupid thing was old and no longer working. And the gate was locked. Chris was now already out of the car too. They shouted at the gate but no one was answering.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, I'm jumping over this gate."

-Chris: "But aren't we gonna get ourselves into trouble if we do that? Who does Minnie stay with here?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't care about no trouble, I care about saving Minnie's life. If the woman she's staying with was home she would have answered our shouts already."

She said that already climbing over the gate. And with ease she was inside. Chris also jumped over and they ran down the walk to the front door. Sthandiwe knocked quickly. No answer. She knocked again before:

-Sthandiwe: "Minnie? Minnie? Minenhle it's Sthandiwe open up."

And when no one answered the door, she opted for another way. Without even notifying Chris, she stepped back from the door and with one mae geri (front kick) from her the door whipped open. They both charged in, but found the lounge empty.

-Sthandiwe: "Minnie?"

Still, no answer. They ran to the kitchen and found her sitting at the kitchen table before a small mountain of pills. And trails of recent tears marked her face. They were both stunned by the sight of her. She looked near death, emotional death. But thank God she hadn't taken the pills yet.

-Minenhle: (tearfully) "I couldn't...I just couldn't..."

Sthandiwe rushed to her and pulled her into an embrace. She held her close without saying a word. She could feel the pain she was feeling, she had also been there at some point. Minenhle sobbed into her chest and she let her. Chris just stood there, not knowing what to do. Finally, Sthandiwe stepped back and motioned for Chris to do something. He didn't ask any questions, he swept Minenhle into his arms and made for the door. Sthandiwe grabbed some keys that were on top of the cupboard then followed them out of the house. Luckily one of those keys was for the gate padlock. She opened the gate and they walked out to the car. Chris went to put the fragile girl into the back seat of his car while Sthandiwe locked the gate again. Then they got inside the car and drove back home in silence. Seeing Minenhle like that had woken up some old ghosts inside Sthandiwe.

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They got to the apartment and Chris carried Minenhle to the spare bedroom and put her on the bed then walked out. Sthandiwe walked in and took off Minenhle's shoes and put her into bed, then pulled the covers up.

-Sthandiwe: "You are loved. Just know that."

She wasn't expecting her to respond, she was just assuring her. Then she turned off the lights and left her without saying another word. She understood that in that state the poor girl was in no mood to talk, she just wanted to be left alone.

She went to Chris in their bedroom and together they called Xolisa with the phone put on speaker. They told him that his sister was okay and that she was with them. A wave of relief washed over Xolisa and he didn't know how to thank them. But they didn't need no "thank yous", they had just done what any other human being with a heart would have done in that situation. They hung up then took off their clothes and got into bed. Chris could see that she wasn't okay and he knew why.

-Chris: "Do you wanna talk maybe?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. I want you to make love to me and I'll be okay."

She said that already kissing him. He didn't waste time, he responded.

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In the morning they got up, made the bed and went to take a shower. They got done and got dressed.

-Sthandiwe: "I'd take Minnie with me back to Jo'burg today to stay with me but I'm sure Gauteng is the last place she wants to be in right now. That's where this whole thing happened after all."

-Chris: "But, babe, I gotta go to work and she can't be alone in here. There's no telling what she might do. We do not want her to try and do what she wanted to do last night."

-Sthandiwe: "So what's the plan?"

-Chris: "It's fine, I'll take her to Claire in Llandudno. She's on leave and I'm sure she won't mind taking care of her until we all figure out what to do."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, babe. Let me go wake her up and see if she wants to do this."

-Chris: "And I'll call Claire."

She went to Minenhle's room and found her awake, just staring up at the ceiling. She greeted and went to sit beside her. She told her what they wanted her to do and she had no problem with it. She got up and went to take a shower. Chris gave her fresh towels and a new tooth brush while Sthandiwe made her bed. When she was done taking the shower, Sthandiwe shared her toiletries with her and gave her some of her clothes to change into. Chris cancelled his morning appointments and they all sat at the kitchen counter and had some cereal and fruit salad. Then Sthandiwe took her suitcase to Chris' car and they drove to Llandudno to leave Minenhle. Claire was only happy to host her. So they left her with her and drove to the airport. Sthandiwe said her goodbyes and went to board her 10:15 flight. And Chris drove to work.

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As soon as she got to OR Tambo she went to get her car and drove straight to Randburg before going home. She went to meet up with her PI in his office and he brought her up to speed.

-The PI: "This boy's a real piece of work. He really puts the ass in jackass. What a waste of humanity?"

-Sthandiwe: "Meaning?"

-The PI: "He's a fucked up junkie of a lawyer, for one. He takes coke like sugar. And doesn't have even the slightest respect for women. His baby mama has been admitted 3 times to the ER this year only, beaten to a pulp by him. What an abusive bastard."

-Sthandiwe: "I thought it was only me. That's what he did to me too. He would kick me like a dog and call me disgusting names every chance he got."

-The PI: "What, you once dated him too?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah. And I don't wanna talk about it."

-The PI: "All women are bitches to him. He's got mommy issues. He was dumped by his mother when he was still an infant."

-Sthandiwe: "And now we all have to suffer because of that? Hell, no! I'll show him his mother."

She was angry. She took the file that was on the table and moved for the door. But at the door she stopped and looked at the PI.

-Sthandiwe: "Do you have info about the baby mama in this file?"

-The PI: "Of course. Even about their 2 year-old baby boy. Their pictures too. The woman works at some restaurant down in Melville and she's on shift as we speak. Knocks off at 17:00. But you'll find everything you'd want to know in that file."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. Your money will be in your account."

She walked out.

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She got to her car and read the file. Then she drove to Melville. Not to see Greg's baby mama, but to see Uncle Vic in his surgery. Again, she just walked into the consultation room without even knocking. Luckily, Uncle Vic was already wrapping up with his patient. The patient walked out, Sthandiwe stood by the door.

-Uncle Vic: "I won't even waste my energy on you, baby. You have a mind of your own, just like your father."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, speaking of that...when you were at my house that day, you looked at me then said I was really my father's daughter. What did you mean by that?"

-Uncle Vic: "I know, in fact it was quite obvious, that you had gotten into some sort of dangerous fight that day. Your father was like that too. He never ran away from a fight. He'd fight till the end, whether using his brains or brawn. And go ghetto in a minute if need be. Most men in the position he was in only delegate, they don't get their hands dirty. But not him. He believed in taking care of his business himself and mostly alone. He came to me twice, injured and seeking medical attention. He couldn't go to the hospital because questions he wasn't willing to answer were gonna be asked, so he came to me. But I'm sure you and your mother weren't aware of any of this."

-Sthandiwe: (remembering) "He was doing Krav Maga and he'd say that's how he got injured. And I remember, both times he'd sleep in the spare bedroom for days. They thought I didn't notice but I did. Guess he didn't want my mom to see that he was lying about the Krav Maga injuries...Tell me, was he into some shady business?"

-Uncle Vic: "No. But he had some enemies. That's all I'm gonna say. See, when you do good, you always attract enemies."

-Sthandiwe: "Right?...Anyway, lemme not waste any more of your time. I came here because I need your son's phone number. I lost it a while ago."

-Uncle Vic: "Which son? You know that I have two sons."

-Sthandiwe: "The one that's in the military. Sean. He's around, right? I've seen it on his social media pages... I really need to talk to him, uncle Vic. Hell, I need see him. But please don't ask."

-Uncle Vic: "I won't... And if you go now, I'm sure you'll find him home."

He gave her his number. And she left.

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She got to her car and drove home. She got there and ran straight to the bedroom. She quickly got out of her dress and put on blue jeans, white T-shirt, white Nike sneakers, a blue denim jacket and a white cap. Then she went back to her car and drove to Glenvista to see Sean. On the way, she called him and asked to see him. He was quite surprised to hear from her after 2 years of no communication. It was a pleasant surprise though. And he was eager to see her. She got there, parked on the street and called him to come outside. He wanted her to get in but she didn't want to, so he agreed to come outside. She got out of the car and leaned on it, waiting for him. After some time, Sean, 32, handsome, walked out of the gate and looked at her as she leaned on the car with one of her feet up against it and hands tucked in the pockets of her jacket, looking down. He smiled to himself as he walked towards her. Her mind was miles away and only came back when she heard his voice.

-Sean: "Now I'm certain that something's wrong."

She looked up.

-Sthandiwe: "Excuse me?"

-Sean: "You used to dress like that when you feeling down or up to no good. So which one is it now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Now you think you know me."

-Sean: "I do. I know you inside and out, Tee. I know every inch of your body."

-Sthandiwe: "Please grow up."

He came to stand in front of her.

-Sean: "I've been missing you."

He hugged her. They hugged.

-Sean: "You look good. How have you been?"

-Sthandiwe: "I've been okay. You?"

-Sean: "Okay."

A moment passed with them just looking at each other, both unsure of what to say next. It was just awkward, until:

-Sean: (smiling) "Missed me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not really."

-Sean: "Tee, you know that we had something good, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sean, please, let's not talk about that. And don't talk as if I'm the one who ended things. You did. Remember?"

-Sean: "Not because I didn't love you anymore but because you made it so difficult for me to stay in that relationship. Your insecurities ruined what we had."

-Sthandiwe: "Insecurities? Sean, your job would take you out of the country, away from me, for months. And when out there you were connecting with that female colleague of yours. You two were just too close for my liking. She'd be all over you like a bad rash. But even now you're still telling me about insecurities? What was I supposed to think, Sean?"

He put his hands on both her shoulders and looked into her eyes.

-Sean: "Tee, I told you then and I'm still telling you now, nothing was going on between me and Natasha. Long distance relationships take a lot of work, Tee, and trust is..."

-Sthandiwe: (cutting him off) "This...is not why I'm here, Sean. I'm here because I need something from you. Two things actually."

She said that removing his hands from her. He tucked them in the pockets of his sweat pants, still looking at her.

-Sean: "Oh? So what is it that you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "One of your DuPont Kevlar vests. And one of your cool gadgets, a spy cam."

-Sean: "And what do you need those for?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I can't share that info with you. But I really need them."

-Sean: "Are you in some kind of trouble, Tee?"

-Sthandiwe: " Like I said, Sean, I can't..."

-Sean: (finishing her sentence) "...tell me. Sure, I get it. And it's cool, I won't ask anymore. But I'll give you what you need. Only because I want you to be safe."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. So name your price."

-Sean: "Name my price? What do you take me for, Tee? Look, I'll give you what you need. But I don't need payment."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I appreciate it."

Sean: "But to get what you need you need to come inside."

He said that already walking to the gate. She hesitated then followed him. They got inside the house and he gave her what she needed. And he also managed to convince her to stay just a little bit longer

just for a chat. It was actually not as bad or awkward as she thought it would be. But she only stayed for about 30 minutes then left and drove to Melville.

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She got to the restaurant where Greg's baby mama worked and parked her car. She took the file she got from the PI and took out a surveillance photo of Melody (the baby mama) carrying her 2 year-old son. She put it in her pocket, then got out of the car and walked inside the restaurant. A waiter came to her, showed her a table and handed her the menu.

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, bhuti wam [my brother], but I'd like to be served by Melody. I'd appreciate it if you could get her for me. You don't mind, right?"

-The Waiter: "No, I don't mind. I'll get her for you."

He went to the back. And after some moments he came back with Melody and pointed her to Sthandiwe's table. She walked over to her and greeted with a smile. Melody was a beautiful Coloured woman, maybe 30.

-Melody: "I hear you specifically requested for me. Sorry, I was at the back."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, I asked for you because apparently you are the best waitron around here."

-Melody: (smiling) "Oh, thank you. So what would you like to have?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just an orange juice, dear."

-Melody: "Coming up."

She walked away. Moments later she came back with the juice. Sthandiwe gulped it down in front of her then asked for a bill. She was shocked but she went away then came back with the bill. Sthandiwe took out R50 note from her pocket, together with Melody's photo and put them inside the bill folder. Then handed it back to her.

-Sthandiwe: "I've put a generous tip for you inside."

-Melody: "Thank you."

-Sthandiwe: "Go ahead, check it out right now."

She did. And she blanched immediately when she saw that surveillance photo.

-Melody: "Who are you and what do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm someone who wants to talk to you immediately when your shift ends. And that's in less than 10 minutes from now. So be sure to meet me outside and you'll get the answers to your questions."

And with that she got up and walked to the door. Leaving Melody a little scared.

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Sthandiwe walked out of the restaurant and went to wait for Melody by her (Melody) car, a white Hyundai Atos. When her shift ended, Melody walked out of the restaurant and saw Sthandiwe leaning on her car, waiting for her. She was a little scared but she walked over to her anyway, because she didn't know what she might do to her son if she didn't. And seeing that she knew a lot about her, even the car she was driving, freaked her out even more.

-Melody: "Who are you? What do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "Melody, my name's Sthandiwe. And I know you're scared but I'm not here to hurt you."

-Melody: "Oh, that's comforting coming from someone who's been surveilling me and my son."

-Sthandiwe: "If I wanted to hurt you or your son, I would have already. Just walk with me to my car and we'll talk."

Melody hesitated, but ended up going. Sthandiwe opened the passenger door for her to get in, then went to get in on her side.

-Sthandiwe: "Relax, dear. No one's gonna hurt you."

-Melody: "This is about Greg, isn't it? He did something to you and now you want him to pay by taking us, me and my son. I know he always gets himself into trouble and now he's pulling us down into that whole with him."

-Sthandiwe: "What you're saying is not entirely true. Yes, this is about Greg but the abduction part is off the mark. Like I said, I wouldn't do anything to hurt you or your boy. On the contrary, I want to save you...from Greg."

-Melody: "So what do you want? You want me to help you kill him?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'd love to kill him but no. What I want is access to his father's gated mansion that he now lives in. I want to get to him without him knowing but I don't wanna kill him."

-Melody: "So you hate him too then why not kill him? He's a pig, he deserves to die."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I need him alive to feel the pain of what I want to do to him...I know that he beats you, Melody. He turned you into his punching bag. So why are you still with him? Why don't you leave him?"

-Melody: "He won't let me. Every time I try, I wake up from a hospital bed. He treats me like trash. I hate him. I hate him."

She said that with tears already trickling down her cheeks. Sthandiwe held her hand.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, after I meet with him he won't be able to hurt you again. So help me so I can help you and your son. Help me get in that bastard's house."

Melody pondered that then:

-Melody: "Okay, I'll help you. But I never go to his house unless he summons me...But it's okay, I'll find a reason to go there so I can sneak you in."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks... Tomorrow morning."

-Melody: "That's okay. The sooner the better."

Okay, this was too easy. Sthandiwe smiled but the smile was disconcerting.

-Sthandiwe: "You wouldn't lie to me and tell me what I want to hear now, would you, Melody?"

-Melody: "No. Of course not. I hate Greg as much if not more than you do. Yes, he's the father of my son but he sure doesn't behave like one. He treats me and our son like trash. He doesn't deserve to be a father or a living human being for that matter."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, that's good. 'Cause I know where you live. And it'd be very heartbreaking to come back home from work one day and find the house empty. No nanny, no Jack... That's your son's name right? You named him after his father, Greg Jack Mason, when things were still rosy."

The threat unsettled Melody.

-Melody: "Don't. Please don't threaten my son. You said you wouldn't hurt us."

-Sthandiwe: "And you said you'll help me. But if you don't and choose to warn Greg instead, I'll also go back on my word and do something we both won't like. And we both know that Greg won't protect you."

Of course, she didn't mean that. Using the innocents wasn't something she liked. She just wanted to make sure that Melody doesn't screw her over.

-Melody: (freaked out) "I'll help you, I'll help you. And I mean it, I'm not playing you. Please don't hurt my son."

-Sthandiwe: "Great then. I'll come to your place tomorrow morning, around 9:00. Then we'll go to Greg's. So you better get your story straight."

Melody nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, it's gonna be okay. Okay?"

Melody nodded again then got out of the car and walked back to hers.

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Sthandiwe drove off. On the way, she called KG.

KG was also driving, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel as he rhymed along Drake's "Hotline Bling" (was still new at the time) that was playing in his car radio. Sthandiwe's call disturbed him but he answered.

-KG: "Hey, how's Cape Town?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm back and I wanna see you. Where you at?"

-KG: "Ummmh...I'm on my way to Rosebank. Is everything okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "You're going to see Palesa?"

-KG: "Yeah. She's moved back to her apartment."

-Sthandiwe: "Alright then, go see your woman. I'll see you some other time. And yes, everything's okay, don't worry. I just wanted to talk to my best friend."

She wanted to tell him about Greg but hearing that he was going to his girlfriend made her change her mind. She didn't wanna burden him.

-KG: "Now that I have a girlfriend I'll be scarce, hey"

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "I know, right? And I don't mind. You gotta spend time with her, I understand...So you're both serious about this relationship, huh?"

-KG: "I think."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, as long as it's not one-sided I'm happy...Anyway, did you hear about Reneé? Bitch's dead."

She told him how they say it happened.

-KG: "Good riddance. You should really celebrate, ST. Hell, we should all celebrate. That woman put us through hell. But it's all over now. You did it, buddy, you did it. You got rid of them all...Remember when you thought you'd never be able to do it? You thought taking Mason down was impossible but you did it."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess now I'll know peace and focus on my engagement."

-KG: "Exactly. You need to believe more in yourself, ST. Remember what you said to me when we were in that God-forsaken farm in Kroonstad? You quoted Napoleon, 'Impossible is a word only to be found in the dictionary of fools.' You should always remember that quote in every situation."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess. Anyway, is MaKhumalo home? I need to see her."

-KG: "Yeah. She had just got in when I left."

-Sthandiwe: "Cool. Talk tomorrow then. Pass my greetings to Lisa. And tell her about Reneé's death. I'm sure she'll be happy, I know how much she wanted her dead."

Then she hung up and pressed the car to Palmridge.

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She got to KG's and parked on the street. Then she went inside and knocked on the front door. MaKhumalo told her to go around to the kitchen. She did and found her there, chopping onions.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello, Ma."

-MaKhumalo: "Hey, baby. How are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. How are you, Ma?"

-MaKhumalo: "You know me, I'm always fine. Are you here for Kagiso?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I know that he's no in. I just talked to him. I'm actually here to see you."

-MaKhumalo: "Oh?"

She stopped chopping the onions and wiped her hands with a dish cloth. Then opened her arms for a hug.

-MaKhumalo: "Come here."

She hugged her.

-MaKhumalo: "Thank you for coming because I wanted to thank you for getting Kagiso that job. For years, my son has been looking for a job that he is qualified for and now you've got it for him. Thank you, baby. You're amazing. And Kagiso and I are both grateful."

-Sthandiwe: "It was only a pleasure, Ma. You know that KG is like a brother to me and I'd do anything for him."

-MaKhumalo: "You're so kind. Any man that would get to marry you would be so lucky."

-Sthandiwe: "That's actually why I'm here, Ma. I'm engaged."

She showed her the ring.

-MaKhumalo: "Awww, it's so beautiful, baby. Who's the boy? Is he right for you?"

She told her who he was and everything. MaKhumalo took her hand and they went to sit on the high chairs.

-Sthandiwe: "I want us to do things the right way, Ma. I want him to pay lobola and all that. But problem is, I don't have a family here, as you know. So I'm thinking of going to Eastern Cape to look for my father's family, because I don't want to get random people to represent me during the lobola negotiations. But I don't know if that's a good idea or what. Hence I'm here. Ma, you are like a mother to me. And I need a mother right now. I need your advice. Hope you don't mind though."

-MaKhumalo: "Of course, I don't mind. You're my daughter, Thandi...So, do you know your father's family or where they are exactly?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know that they are in Grahamstown. I went there once when I was 15 but I never got to visit them again. And when my parents died, I found a phone number of one of them, my dad's cousin, in my father's diary. That's how I got to inform them about the funeral, and some of them actually came. But I lost contact with them after that. And I didn't even try to find them again. Guess I was still naive, not understanding the importance of family or the importance of knowing ones roots."

-MaKhumalo: "And now you see that importance."

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. I want to know who I am. Where I really come from. This is not just about the lobola negotiations. But I want to know my family. I can't get married alone without my family."

-MaKhumalo: "Then you should go ahead and do it, sthandwa sam. I actually think it's a good idea. It shows some maturity on your part. And, baby, family is everything. We all need family. Yes, you have us and everybody else but you also need your real family, blood family...So when were you thinking of going down to Eastern Cape?"

-Sthandiwe: "I was thinking of using the weekend of next week."

Then they got deeper into the topic and about marriage in general. MaKhumalo saw a need to give her some marriage advice, as a mother. And Sthandiwe appreciated it. They talked until she decided to leave and drove home.

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In Cape Town. After Chris left the office, he drove to Llandudno to check on Minenhle. She found her doing okay considering everything that was going on. Claire and Zach made her feel at home. And the parents were still not back yet. Claire actually loved having her around. She was Xolisa's little sister after all. And Claire actually liked Xolisa.

Chris asked to talk to her in private, wanting to find out about the woman she was staying with in Mowbray. So she told him. Apparently, she knew her from back home in Centurion. They were attending the same church years ago before the woman moved to Cape Town. So when she got to Cape Town and things got rough staying with friends, the woman took her in. And life was good until she had to relive the rape incident. So when she was left alone in the house the evening of the previous day, she saw an opportunity to just end it all. But after they rescued her and after she had some talk with Claire, she started seeing how stupid the decision she had taken was. She realised that she was only giving that rapist bastard satisfaction. And now she was determined to live her life and get her power back.

Chris suggested therapy to her. And he left there relieved, seeing that she was okay. He drove to Mowbray and found Minenhle's guardian home. They had some talk about Minenhle then he gave her money to replace the door Sthandiwe had broken. After that he drove home.

When he walked into his apartment, he felt lost. The apartment felt cold and empty without Sthandiwe and her laughter. She had left only that morning but he was already missing her like crazy. He went to put his bags in his office then went to take a shower. When he was done and putting the

vest and shirt he was wearing in the laundry basket, he noticed his T-shirt that Sthandiwe had worn the day before. He took it out and brought it to his face, sniffing in her fragrance. That made him miss her even more. He put the T-shirt on, wanting to smell her on him. Then he went to sit on the bed, wanting to call her. But just as he was about to hit "Call", her call came through. Because when she got home from Palmridge, she just took a quick shower and when she was done she decided to call her man.

Chris answered and they talked for hours. None of them wanted to hang up, so they agreed that they would talk until one of them falls asleep. And that's exactly what they did. They talked until Sthandiwe fell asleep, after 00:00.

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In the morning, she managed to wake up, thanks to the alarm she had set. She woke up feeling a little sick and tired. But she didn't have time to entertain that. She made her bed then went to take a shower. After that she got dressed in black jeans, sneakers and didn't forget to put on the Kevlar vest under her black denim jacket. She wanted to be on the safe side just in case Greg pulls the trigger on her. Best thing about Kevlar is that it's lightweight and concealable. Then she went to stand in front of a mirror, combed her hair and put on a cap. Then she fixed a button that was the odd-one-out on her jacket. After that she went to the study, grabbed a mini tape recorder and a spare gate remote and keys for the Hyde Park house. She put everything in her cross body sling bag. Then went downstairs to have some cereal and fruit. When she was done she drove to Hyde Park, without taking her tablets. She didn't take them because she wanted to be mentally sharp and besides, she wasn't feeling any pain on her ribs. Maybe it was time she stopped taking the pills for good, her ribs had healed.

She got to the house and went to get one of the unregistered handguns in the safe. Not forgetting the silencer and extra ammo. Then she drove back to Hursthill to get Melody. She left her car there and drove to Midrand with Melody in hers.

-Sthandiwe: "So what did you say to Greg?"

-Melody: "We share custody of our son, so I told him that I want full custody. He got mad and told me to come to his house today."

-Sthandiwe: "It worked. But you should really get that custody. Actually, I fail to understand why you share your child's custody with a junkie... Anyway, did you make sure he's alone?"

-Melody: "Oh, he's alone alright. Because he wants to rough me up. And he never does that when there are people around."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now please give me his phone number."

She did. And when they were about a minute out, Sthandiwe called him. He was in his study sniffing coke as usual when the call came through. He answered, annoyed.

-Greg: "Who the fuck is this?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's the woman you put your dirty d**k inside of 8 years ago. Sthandiwe."

-Greg: "Sthandiwe? What the fuck do you want, bitch?"

-Sthandiwe: "I want to warn you. I asked you to stop what you were doing to me 8 years but you didn't stop. And now I'm coming for you. I like to warn people before I come for them but they never listen, I hope you do. For your sake."

-Greg: "Listen here, bitch. I don't..."

She hung up. And they were already driving up to his gate. Sthandiwe laid down on the back seat. And Melody hit the intercom. The bastard let her in and she drove up the driveway and went to park in front of the house.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm getting out. Drive back to the gate and get out of here as soon as he opens the gate for you."

Melody nodded.

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Sthandiwe got out of the car with her bag slung over her shoulder and across her body. She walked to the front door as Melody drove back to the gate. Before knocking on the door she put the recorder in the back pocket of her jeans and drew her gun, then knocked. Greg went to open, wearing just shorts and a vest, barefooted. He blanched at the sight of her with the gun pointed at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Show me your hands."

But all the shock left his face in a second. And he just laughed. The guy was really high.

-Greg: "Sthandiwe? I really didn't think you were serious."

He said that as he kept sniffing and wiping his nose with his fingers.

-Sthandiwe: "I was. Now walk inside."

-Greg: "Bitch, walk away and I won't hurt you."

-Sthandiwe: "I might be wrong but I think I'm the one holding the gun."

-Greg: "You have no idea who you're dealing with. Listen here, little girl, I'm not that same young man you tried to fight off and almost succeeded years ago."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm no longer that little girl either. Now stop wasting my time and walk inside."

-Greg: "That's not gonna happen. Just get the fuck off my property before I kick your ass."

-Sthandiwe: "Let me tell you how this works, Greg. I have a gun and you don't. Which means you're not exactly in the position of power. I am."

She said that pulling the trigger, showing him that she wasn't there to play. She grazed his forearm, on purpose. And the bullet careened and got lodged onto a painting that was hanging on the far wall behind him in the entrance hall.

-Sthandiwe: "Inside. NOW."

He was now groaning in pain, with his other hand over the bullet wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

-Sthandiwe: "I've grazed your arm on purpose. But next time, trust me, I won't miss the bone."

He could see that she wasn't playing, so he turned around and walked deeper inside.

-Greg: "That bitch Melody played me. I'm gonna get her."

-Sthandiwe: "Just open the gate for her then walk to the living room."

He did just that, then led Sthandiwe to the living room, with her gun still pointed to his head.

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They got to the lounge and she instructed him to sit down on the couch. Her other hand moved to her back pocket and pressed the recording button on the recorder.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure you're comfortable on that couch. Now, let's do this. Why did you rape me?"

-Greg: "Rape you? (he chuckled) Sthandiwe Blie, Sthandiwe Blie, why are you acting? Bitch, you liked it."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, let's try this again before I get angry and give you one of those again."

She said that gesturing to the bullet wound on his arm.

-Sthandiwe: "Why the fuck did you rape me, Greg Mason? Why did you physically and sexually assault me?"

-Greg: "You deserved it. All women are bitches and y'all deserve every bad thing that happens to you...I should have killed you then when I had the chance, little bitch. Raping you was nothing. You liked it. You enjoyed it."

He said more and more disgusting things about that rape and how he enjoyed himself. Sthandiwe's anger was two seconds away from boiling over and she felt like blowing the motherfucker's brains off once and for all. But she tried to calm herself down, using every little bit of strength she had, because she still wanted to hear more.

-Sthandiwe: "I sure misjudged just how sick you are. You really are a sick fuck... Now let's change the subject, let's talk about my parents. See, I already know that your father had them killed. What I wanna know is who did he send to do it and how they did it. Play games with me and you know what will happen."

He smirked.

-Greg: "Oh, that. Matthews and I did it, and I sure enjoyed it."

-Sthandiwe: "And who the fuck is Matthews?"

-Greg: "My father's head of security. Your father thought he was a smart ass, just like you, and we showed him his place. He deserved to die."

He was really enraging her but she managed to avoid losing it.

-Sthandiwe: "How did you do it?"

He laughed then told her everything. How they put a tiny tracker on his car's rear bumper and followed him to Eastern Cape, then tempered with the brakes of his car when he parked and left it in a filling station in Aliwal North. And that they did it in Eastern Cape so that no one would suspect them.

So that's why BB lost control of his car and couldn't stop at the robots, ended up hitting Alizwa's car and his car being hit by a truck. Small world.

-Greg: "Now that you know all of this whatcha gonna do, huh? Bitch, you're not gonna kill anyone with that gun. You don't have it in you."

He said that with a smirk painted across his face, showing not even the slightest remorse. He actually enjoyed narrating the story to her, tormenting her. But she still managed to keep her cool.

-Sthandiwe: "Where does this Matthews live?"

-Greg: "Eden Park in Alberton."

-Sthandiwe: "I know where Eden Park is. Now give me his address."

He didn't want to at first but she threatened to pull the trigger again so he ended up giving it to her.

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After that, Sthandiwe pulled the tape recorder from her back pocket and played back Greg's confession. His eyes went wide when he realised that she was recording him all that time.

-Sthandiwe: "You just confessed to two crimes. And I have everything on tape."

She pointed to the odd button on her jacket.

-Sthandiwe: "This looks like an additional button but it's not. It's actually a wide angle fibre optics lense. Which means now I have a video of you confessing to everything you did."

She paced around, but her gun still pointed at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Now here's what's gonna happen, Greg. You're not gonna go after Melody. You're not gonna contact her again, you will stay away from her and her son. And you will make sure that the investigation on your father's arsenic poisoning stops. Because the perpetrator is standing right in front of you. But you won't tell anyone about it, you will just let it go. See, I poisoned your father by putting arsenic acid in his whiskey on the day of the party. And just like I've done with you, I warned him first but he underestimated me. Next thing, he was dead... Eye for an eye, right? You killed my father, and I killed yours."

He was now fuming with anger. He felt like jumping off that couch, grab her throat and squeeze the life out of her. But with that gun pointed at him, he couldn't take that chance.

-Greg: (fuming) "You're gonna pay for this, you little bitch. Hear me?"

-Sthandiwe: "I wasn't done talking...Maybe I will pay, Greg, but you're not the one who's gonna make me pay. Greg, you will not come after me and you will not send your men either. If you fail to do any of the things I've mentioned, your confessions will reach the cops. And I'm sure you do not want them sniffing around your personal business now, do you? I mean we both know that you have some more skeletons in your closet."

-Greg: "What the fuck are you talking about?"

-Sthandiwe: "See, I know that some poor girl you were dating in 2011 just vanished without a trace in that same year. I bet my ass you beat her to death, Greg, then buried her body. And I have a pretty good idea where. The only place that you visit every Sunday, your grandparents farm. So, if you do anything stupid, like killing me and make it look like an accident, my friend will make sure that the cops won't only get this confession video but also everything I know about you killing Sasha and the exact location of her body on that farm...Of course, you can go dig her up and bury her elsewhere but just know that her DNA has leached into the soil by now."

His eyes had now widened.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I guess I've been watching a lot of ID Xtra. Anyway, know this, once her family hears about all of this, they'd never let it go. They'd get to the bottom of it, even have that soil tested if they find the body removed. They'll make sure that you get prosecuted, Greg. So be smart, pal. If I, Melody or any of my friends dies you will go to prison for multiple crimes."

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She was now feeling confident. Too confident too soon. She didn't bet on Greg putting on some physical fight. Big mistake. She didn't even know that he had a purple belt in Shotokan (semi-contact karate). She just got too cocky and forgot her father's teachings, "never underestimate your opponent."

-Sthandiwe: "And this is yours. I don't need it. The video is enough."

She said that throwing the tape recorder at him, but instead of catching it, he saw that as an opportunity to destruct her.

As the recorder was flying towards him, he quickly grabbed a tea-light candle holder that was on the end-table next to the couch he was sitting on and threw it at her. By the time her mind registered that it was just a damn decorative tea-light candle holder and shrugged it off, Greg was already up from the couch and ready to attack. He quickly kicked the hand that was holding the gun, the gun flew off her hand and landed at a distance. But Greg didn't go for it, he was happy to use his fists even with that bullet grazing on his forearm. He pressed his attack, releasing quick punches. To his surprise, Sthandiwe was blocking each and every one of them as she reversed towards a wall that was behind her. He decided to stop with the punches, he bullrushed forward into her and slammed her into the wall, hard. Then he released another punch to her face but she quickly shifted her head to the side and he missed and hit the wall, hurting his hand. As he was still focusing on that pain, she kned him in the stomach. And he doubled over, but tried to grab her arm. But hell, not Sthandiwe's, she wouldn't let him. She also got down and rose up with two punches followed by a kick. She was quick and all her blows hit their marks. Greg was now realising that defeating her hand-to-hand wasn't going to be a walk in the park, so he backpedalled towards the gun. He dived down to get to it, and when Sthandiwe saw what he was doing, she immediately followed suit. They wrestled for the gun but Greg reached it first and pointed it to her, both still on the floor.

-Greg: "Get up, bitch."

She got up with her hands up in the air.

-Greg: "Move and I'll kill you."

He said that getting up to his feet.

-Sthandiwe: "For the rec, I believe you, Greg. A psychopath like you has no respect for human life."

She knew that this could be it for her. No neighbour was going to come and rescue her in that neighbourhood. She's not the screaming type, but in that situation, even screaming wasn't going to help. So she kept quiet and awaited her fate. But he didn't pull the trigger. That to her was a sign that he didn't want to kill her just yet. And that worked for her, she sure wasn't going to make it easy for him when he finally decides to kill her. She was going to fight or die trying. She just waited for an opportunity to present itself.

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Greg grabbed keys that were on the coffee table.

-Greg: "Bitch, walk forward. Down the corridor."

She obliged. She began to walk down the corridor, Greg pointing the gun close to the back of her head.

-Sthandiwe: "So what are you gonna do to me?"

-Greg: "You're gonna make me feel good. Then I'm gonna kill you and destroy that stupid lens of yours. I'm gonna show you exactly what bitches like you deserve."

-Sthandiwe: (sarcastic) "Oh, I'm so scared...You do know that if you kill me you'll go to jail for Sasha's murder, right?"

-Greg: "I'll cross that bridge when I get to it. Just keep walking."

She knew that she was screwed because she had no proof that he really killed Sasha. She was just bluffing, using her PI's speculations. But judging from the look on his face when she told him about it, the theory seemed to be correct. But problem was that none of her friends knew about it or even that she was going after Greg. So yeah, it was really not looking good for her.

Greg "led" her from behind to a door that was at the very end of that long corridor.

-Greg: "Stop."

-Sthandiwe: "It's the only possible thing to do, isn't it? I mean, it's the end of the corridor."

But he didn't respond to that. She could sense a small lapse in his concentration. He was busy fiddling with the keys trying to find the right one for the door. That was the window of opportunity she was waiting for and she used it to turn the tables on him. After all chance favours the prepared.

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She quickly turned around and grabbed his arm, the one with the gun, and twisted it. The gun fell off his grip and landed by the door. But before going for it, she had to immobilise him first. She kned him in the balls and he doubled over, groaning in pain. That was her chance to flip his skinny ass down the floor and she pounced on him. She got on top of him and pounded him in the face, angry. But he wasn't going to let her make him her slam man punch bag like that, his hand reached up ready to grab her throat. But she quickly rolled off of him and reached for the gun by the door. She grabbed it and pointed it to him.

-Sthandiwe: "Whoever taught you those moves forgot one thing. They forgot to tell you to never hold a gun that close to your human target. You definitely shouldn't have done it to me. You should have shot me in the head the second you got hold of this gun...Now feel what I came here to do."

She pulled the trigger four times, shooting him twice in each knee cap and he screamed in pain. But she showed him no mercy, she rolled him over with kicks and planted three more bullets in his spinal cord without even flinching. And his groans of pain meant nothing to her.

She felt remorse when she shot and killed those guards in Booyens and Kroonstad because they were not really her enemies. But with Ethan and Greg it was different, she felt nothing. They were her enemies and she had no reason to feel anything.

-Sthandiwe: "I've shot both your knee caps and your spinal cord. You know what that means, right? It means chances of you walking again are slim to none. Which means, no more going around harassing

and abusing women, Greg. You'll spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair, being the little pathetic excuse of a man that you really are. And that'll be much worse than death for you."

-Greg: "You are a bitch."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. Now here's what's gonna happen. You're gonna call an ambulance and it will take you to hospital. And when you're well enough to talk to the police, you will make up a story about how this happened. And in that story you will make sure that you don't mention my name, otherwise you know what will happen. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "You still think I don't have it in me? Eight years ago I was still a sweet, innocent girl. And you turned me into this monster when you decided to rape me and kill my parents 5 years later. Now know this, the monster that you created won't have a problem ripping you into shreds if you do anything stupid."

And with that she rushed back to the lounge and grabbed the cordless house phone. Then rushed back to Greg and handed it to him to call the ambulance. He was in pain, bleeding and slowly fading, but he managed to make the call. He had no choice, he wanted help, he was in so much pain. After that Sthandiwe wiped her prints off the phone and left him lying there, bleeding and in pain. She reloaded her gun and put it in her bag. She went to pick up that tape recorder, then opened the gate for herself and walked out of there. She walked down the street and requested an uber to take her to Eden Park.

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On the way to Eden Park, Sthandiwe called Xolisa and asked him to call his rapist of an uncle over to his place because she would want to have a chat with him in the next 3 hours or less. Even though Xolisa didn't like the idea, he agreed to do it.

The uber got to Eden Park, which she was very much familiar with, and she asked the driver to drop her 3 streets before Matthews's - just to throw anyone off her scent. She fixed her head cap and kept

her head down as she walked the rest of the way to Matthews's address. She got to the address, a corner house, and found the manual gate open and a car personalised "Matt" on the registration plate parked in the driveway, suggesting that Matthews had just drove in. She made sure her cam was deactivated then walked through the open gate just as Mason's Head of Security, Matthews, Coloured, late 30s, was getting out of the Mercedes. His eyes met hers and they went wide immediately because he knew exactly who she was.

-Matthews: "What do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: (calmly) "Hello. Are you Matthews? I'm here to see him."

-Matthews: "I am Matthews. What do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, I need to talk to you. Can we please go inside?"

-Matthews: "I don't wanna hear anything you have to say. Just get out of here."

-Sthandiwe: (still pleasant) "Please. I won't take much of your time."

-Matthews: "Are you deaf? I said get out of here. I don't want to talk to you."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, now you leave me no choice."

She quickly pulled the gun out of her bag, cocked it and pointed it at him.

-Sthandiwe: (stern voice) "Inside the house. Now."

Without saying a word, he turned and made his way to the front door. Sthandiwe followed him at a safe distance, her gun discreetly pointed at him. But for some reason, he didn't seem scared at all.

They got to the door and it was locked, suggesting there was no one inside the house. Matthews took his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

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He opened the door and they both walked inside.

-Sthandiwe: "Where's everybody? Wife? Kids?"

-Matthews: "I don't have any of those. I live alone."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, good. Now move towards the couches and take a seat."

-Matthews: "Little girl, what do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "Matthews, just take a seat."

He did.

-Matthews: "You don't need that gun. You're not gonna shoot me."

-Sthandiwe: "You're right. I'm not here to shoot you. I just want one thing and one thing only - an apology."

She sat down on a couch that was opposite Matthews's, her gun still pointed at him.

-Matthews: "Apology? From me?"

She nodded.

-Matthews: "An apology for what?"

-Sthandiwe: "My name's Sthandiwe and you..."

-Matthews: (interrupting) "I know who you are."

She nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "As I was saying before you rudely interrupted me, I'm Sthandiwe and 3 years ago you and Greg killed my parents. Y'all caused me so much pain... Matthews, the day you and Greg took my parents away from me I stopped living. I've just been existing all these years until I met Chris. But that part is not important. What matters is that you and Greg destroyed my life the moment you tempered with my father's car brakes. But I don't really blame you, Matthews. I know that you were only following orders from your employer, Mason. Now all I need is for you to look me in the eye and apologise for what you did. That way I believe I'd be able to find closure and move on with my life."

-Matthews: "Little girl, I don't need to hear this noise. Mason had my loyalty till his dying day. I did what I did to your father because I wanted to, not because Mason forced me to do it. See, your smart-ass father was messing with Mason, which meant he was also messing with me. He wanted to expose Mason and have him thrown in prison, and I couldn't have that. If Mason went to prison that was gonna be it for me. I was gonna find myself living like a bum again, with nothing under my name. Mason is the only man that gave me life. I have a home now, I have cars, I live comfortably, all because of him. So, yes, your father was threatening my livelihood and for that he deserved to die."

Those words forced tears to escape from Sthandiwe's eyes. She felt like she was being stabbed right through the heart, and it hurt like hell.

-Sthandiwe: "I am left alone in this world because of what you did. My parents didn't get to see me graduate for my PhD, they are not gonna see me get married, my dad is not gonna be able to walk me down the aisle and my kids won't get to see their grandparents, all because of you. That's what you and Greg took from me, Matthews. That's what you took from me. And you're not even sorry?"

Tears were now streaming down her cheeks.

-Matthews: "You're so pathetic. You know that? Listen here, little girl, you won't get no apology from me. You just wasted your time coming here."

Sthandiwe, quietly, took a long beat to make a decision.

-Sthandiwe: "Then I'll apologise. I'm sorry, Matthews."

-Matthews: "For what? Wasting my time?"

-Sthandiwe: "No. For this."

She quickly got up and pulled the trigger, shooting him straight in the head. And his soul left his body right then and there.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm really sorry."

She put her gun back in her bag, wiped her tears and walked out of there, making sure to close the door and the gate behind her. She walked to the main road, with her head down. And she requested an uber to take her to Hursthill.

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She got to Hursthill and went to Melody's place to get her car first.

-Melody: "How did it go with Greg?"

-Sthandiwe: "It went. I believe he won't bother you again. You and your son are safe."

-Melody: "Thank you. I don't even wanna know what you did to him, I just wanna say thanks."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, don't mention it. When did his father get buried?"

-Melody: "Yesterday morning. His body got released on Monday. Why do you ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just asking."

-Melody: "Okay. Thanks again for whatever you did to Greg. Thanks for saving me and my son from him... Is there anything I can do to show my appreciation?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, there is. Don't show up on my radar again."

Melody smiled.

-Melody: "Right. Trust me I won't."

Sthandiwe nodded and got into her car. But before leaving she peeked out the window.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Melody. There are surveillance cameras in that mansion, right?"

-Melody: "Yeah, but they automatically erase any footage after 12 hours."

-Sthandiwe: "No back ups?"

-Melody: "Not unless the owners back the footage up themselves."

-Sthandiwe: "Cool. Bye."

She rolled up her window and drove out of there. The footage of her ever being in the Mason residence was going to erase itself that very same day. Great. Which also explained why there was no

footage of her ever being in Reneé's mother's house the night she kidnapped her. She must have had the same security system.

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She drove to the house Xolisa was renting. And it was not that far from Melody's. She parked in the driveway and went inside. He found Xolisa's uncle, 50, watching TV in the lounge. She greeted then asked where Xolisa was. He pointed her to the kitchen. She went there and found Xolisa sitting on one of the high chairs, with his face on the counter.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, XO."

He raised his head.

-Xolisa: "What the fuck, Thandi? Why did you ask me to bring that man here? Have you any idea how hard it was for me to look at him? Pure torture."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, buddy. I'm sure it was difficult. But I need you to please take a walk now. Go get some fresh air. I want to be alone with him."

-Xolisa: "What are you gonna do, Thandi?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing stupid, I promise. Now please go."

He nodded hesitantly. Then walked out the kitchen door and went to his car. He got it and drove off. Leaving the uncle alone with Sthandiwe in the house.

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Sthandiwe went back to the lounge, took the TV remote and turned the TV off.

-The Uncle: "You're Sthandiwe, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, so you know me?"

-The Uncle: "Of course, I know you. I have a very good memory, child. Some months back, I saw you just outside this gate getting into your car and driving off. I had pulled up just behind your car but obviously you didn't notice me. I thought you were Xolisa's girlfriend and I asked him about it but he told me that you were just his colleague."

-Sthandiwe: "Right."

-The Uncle: "That's how I knew that it was your car that was involved in that accident in Malbarton with that girl inside. Then I informed Xolisa about it."

-Sthandiwe: "Right. And you did great that night. But right now I'm here on a different matter. So let's not waste any more time and get down to it."

She discreetly activated her spy cam.

-Sthandiwe: "Four years ago, you raped Xolisa's baby sister, Minenhle, and you..."

-The Uncle: (interrupting) "What? That's ridiculous. I didn't rape anyone. Is that what she's telling people? That I raped her? That girl's insane."

-Sthandiwe: "I wasn't asking you, I was telling you. I know for a fact that you raped her then threatened her so she wouldn't tell anyone about it. Now I want you to tell me when, where, how and why you did it."

-The Uncle: "Listen here, just because I've been nice to you in the past few minutes doesn't mean you know me or that I'm your mate. Do not talk to me like that. Hear me? And I'm out of here."

He got up but Sthandiwe quickly pulled out her gun.

-Sthandiwe: "You're not going anywhere. Sit down and tell me exactly what I wanna know. And Xolisa is not here, I'm sure you've heard him start his car outside minutes ago. Which means you're stuck with just me. And THAT, Mr officer of the law, is very bad...for you."

Her voice was calm but very much scary. He sat down, scared.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't wanna shoot you but I will if you don't cooperate. I've fired this gun a lot today and I don't wanna fire it again, so please, please don't make me do it."

He kept quiet.

-Sthandiwe: "Make no mistake, I really don't have a problem pulling this trigger one more time if you make me. Quite honestly, I don't have much love for rapist pigs like you, so pulling this trigger one more time will be relatively easy for me. Do you get that, Officer?"

He could see it in her eyes that she meant it. He vigorously nodded his head, scared.

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now let's try this again. Calm yourself down and tell me everything about the day you raped Minenhle Ngcobo."

He looked down then raised his head and started narrating everything about that incident. And when Sthandiwe was satisfied she deactivated the cam and:

-Sthandiwe: "You see? Cooperating is not such a bad thing now, is it? You are free to go."

-The Uncle: "I can go? Then why were you asking me all those questions?"

-Sthandiwe: "I just wanted to hear it from your own mouth. Now get out of here."

He got up and took long strides to the door, wanting to get out of there as soon as he could. But before he reached the door:

-Sthandiwe: "And hey, Officer, I know you won't tell anyone about what just happened here, right? Because you'd only be implicating yourself and you'd make me very angry. And trust me you do not

wanna make me angry especially when you have kids at home. You are with the JMPD, and I'd like to think at some point you do uphold the law. I don't."

-The Uncle: "I won't say anything to anyone."

-Sthandiwe: "Good."

He hurried out of there. And Sthandiwe was left calling Xolisa to come back.

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He came back and Sthandiwe told him everything that had transpired between her and his uncle. Then she asked him to come with his laptop. He did and she connected her cam to it and transferred the video. They watched it then edited the first part out, leaving only the confession part.

-Sthandiwe: "You said Minenhle couldn't come back home because she thinks no one would believe her story. That no one would believe that this pig really raped her. Not even your parents. But now they won't have to take her word for it, they'll take his. Take this video and show it to your parents and I'm sure after watching it they'll take some action against this bastard...The video may not hold much water in court but..."

-Xolisa: (finishing the sentence) "It's something. Now my parents will see just who their friend is and my dad won't take this lying down, I know it. He'll make sure that this jerk pays for what he did. Thank you for doing this, Thandi. Really. I didn't know how I was gonna deal with all this but now you've paved the way. This is the beginning. We will deal with this motherfucker."

-Sthandiwe: "You don't have to thank me, buddy. I didn't do much. And Minnie is your sister which means she's my sister too. And besides, she's a woman and as women we should stick together when these things happen."

-Xolisa: "True. But still, thank you. And you handled it well. I didn't think you would."

-Sthandiwe: "I told you in Cape Town, no blood."

-Xolisa: "Yeah, you did...Anyway, would you like something to drink?"

-Sthandiwe: "I would love to stay and spend the day with you, buddy, but there's somewhere I gotta be. And you also need to drive to Pretoria to show this video to your parents. Strike when the iron is still hot, before that pig makes a run for it. Yes, he doesn't know about this video but he's not stupid, he knows that something is not right. He knows that one way or the other your parents will get to hear about what he did and he'll want to run for the hills before that happens."

-Xolisa: "You're right. I better get ready."

-Sthandiwe: "Do that. Anyway, I hear Minnie is doing better now and she loves it in Llandudno."

-Xolisa: "Yeah, she does. Claire is treating her well. She's an amazing person."

He said that with a smile.

-Sthandiwe: "Who's amazing now? Claire? And is that glitter I see in your eyes?"

-Xolisa: (smiling) "I don't know what you're talking about."

She laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "Alright, be secretive. But I can see that there's something going on between you and Claire."

-Xolisa: (smiling) "Just get out of here, dude."

-Sthandiwe: "And now I'm a dude. Alright, I'm going."

They shared a hug and Xolisa walked her to her car. She got inside, but before driving off she rolled down her window.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, XO, make sure y'all get justice for Minnie."

-Xolisa: "We will."

He waved and she backed out the driveway. It was now around 14:00.

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She drove to a tattoo parlour in Newtown. When she walked in, she was welcomed by a nice female tattoo artist. She told her she wanted to have two tattoos. And the artist tried to show her some tattoo designs they had, but Sthandiwe already knew what she wanted to have - a butterfly between her shoulder blades and a number "7" below it.

-Tattoo Artist: "Why those?"

-Sthandiwe: "I think butterflies are God's proof that we can have a second life. And that's exactly what I'm doing now. I'm leaving my old life behind and I'm starting a new one, my second life."

-Tattoo Artist: "I see. And the 7?"

-Sthandiwe: "That I'm afraid I cannot share with you."

-Tattoo Artist: "I'll respect that... So let's do this."

She was now ready with her tattoo gun, ready to begin.

-Tattoo Artist: "This is gonna hurt."

Sthandiwe just shrugged as if to say "I've had worse."

After a lot of buzzing, incessant, the tattoo artist was done and Sthandiwe was pleased with her work. It sure hurt but it was really nothing. She paid then left.

She drove to Jo'burg downtown and walked into the Universal Church in Plein Street. There was a 17:00 o'clock service and she attended it. She hadn't been to church in 3 years but that day she felt the need to communicate with her God, her Creator, and ask for His forgiveness. Forgiveness for every bad thing she had done, for all those lives she took. She wanted to repent.

The service was for something else, but she stayed. Then after it, she requested to see the bishop. He was in the back but he agreed to see her. And she requested a prayer. She needed him to pray with her, not for her. She told him that she was a bad sinner but didn't go into details. She knew that God knew what her sins were and didn't see the need to tell the bishop about them. After the prayer, she walked out of there feeling lighter, really ready to change her life around.

On her way home, she passed by a salon in Braamfontein and requested to have a haircut.

-Hairdresser: "But your hair is so beautiful. Long and rich. Why would you wanna cut it? I'd kill to have hair like this."

-Sthandiwe: "I haven't had a haircut since I was 13. But now I want something new. I'm starting a new life, on a clean slate. And that new life includes having a new hairstyle, growing new hair."

The hairdresser nodded but didn't cut her hair all the way down. She gave her an English cut and styled it with a tong. Sthandiwe paid then left. She passed by KFC for her wings then drove home.

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She got home just around 19:30 and went to sit in the kitchen and feasted on her wings. Then she went to her bedroom, which she didn't sleep in the previous night, and looked around. Everything was still the way she left it before she went to Cape Town. Ethan's blood was still on the floor and on the duvet of the unmade bed. She had never cleaned any of that because she just packed her stuff and left for Cape Town and when she came back the previous day, she went to sleep in the guest room.

She took all the linen on the bed, not just the bloodied duvet, and went to burn them in the backyard. Then she returned with a bucket of water and a mop and cleaned all that blood on the floor tiles. After she was done, she took the gloves off and took out fresh linen from the closet and made her bed. Then she went to the en-suite bathroom, went to the medicine cabinet and took out saline solution. She went to the sink and washed her hands. Then went to sit in front of the mirror and used the saline to remove her black extended wear contact lenses, revealing her natural brown eyes.

She had been wearing black extended wear contacts for the past 3 years, changing them every month, because she was hiding her brown eyes. They were just like her mother's so every time she looked at herself in the mirror she'd be reminded of her and it hurt, hence she decided to just cover them. But now she had closed that chapter and was ready to move forward. Plus she was starting a new life, a life of no guns or violence. She had taken care of all her enemies and she was now leaving the black-eyed Sthandiwe-the-killer behind.

She stared at herself in the mirror for a long moment then:

-Sthandiwe: "The old Sthandiwe Blie is dead."

Then she went back to the bedroom.

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As soon as she walked back into the bedroom, her phone rang. It was Sean, she answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Sean."

-Sean: "How are you, princess?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm okay. You?"

-Sean: "As long as you're fine, I'm fine too. You really got me worried yesterday when you asked for that Kevlar. Are you sure you're not in some kind of trouble?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, whatever it was it's now sorted out. Don't worry. And thanks once again for both the Kevlar and that camera."

-Sean: "Don't mention it. I'm just glad you're okay and safe...Anyway, I noticed a ring on your finger yesterday but I didn't wanna ask. Are you really engaged?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, I am."

Silence. Then:

-Sean: "Congratulations hey. Believe it or not, I'm happy for you. I still miss you but I know that our time expired a long time ago. But just do me a favour, will you?"

-Sthandiwe: "What kind of a favour?"

-Sean: "Don't screw it up with your insecurities like you did with me."

-Sthandiwe: "I won't. I love him too much to do that."

-Sean: "Great then. Take care, Tee. And goodnight."

-Sthandiwe: "Night."

She hung up then took off her clothes and went to take a shower. After she was done she put on her night dress and got into bed. She called Chris. And he was telling her just how much he missed her. It was a Wednesday that day, so she promised to go see him on Saturday.

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She woke up the following day feeling sick and with the urge to throw up. She rushed to the bedroom and threw up into the toilet. Then she went to the sink, rinsed her mouth and stared at herself in the mirror. Her mind was busy, asking herself why she was feeling that way even though she didn't take those pills the previous day. Then the thought of pregnancy crossed her mind.

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, I wouldn't be pregnant. That's impossible."

But she had to be sure. So she went back to the bedroom and made her bed. Then she returned to the bathroom for a shower. After everything, getting dressed and all, she took her handbag and car keys and rushed downstairs. She got out, went to get in her car and drove to a pharmacy. She bought three home pregnancy tests then drove home. Immediately when she got home she took the tests and they all came back positive. And that freaked her out.

-Sthandiwe: "No, no, no. This can't be. This can't be true. How could this have happened? Nooooo!"

She was going crazy, knowing very well that if she was really pregnant then Alizwa was the father. That's what was driving her up the wall.

She grabbed her car keys and left the house again. She got in her car and drove straight to her doctor's office, Dr Mashinini.

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As she sat on those chairs waiting to see the doctor, she was beyond the level of panicking, she was going insane.

Her turn finally came and she walked into the consultation room. She told the doctor what she was there for and Dr Mashinini made her take another test again. The results came back and:

-Dr Mashinini: "See it for yourself. The Clearblue digital test says you're seven weeks pregnant."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "What? But that can't be true. It's impossible. How accurate are these home tests, doc?"

-Dr Mashinini: "They are 99.9% accurate."

-Sthandiwe: "Which means there's that 0.01% chance that they could be wrong."

-Dr Mashinini: "You said you took 3 tests at home, right? And now this one. What are the chances of them all being wrong? But, of course, we'll have to do blood test and an ultrasound to be sure."

-Sthandiwe: "Doctor, you're not hearing me. I cannot be pregnant, I'm on injection. Depo. And I never miss my dates."

-Dr Mashinini: "No birth control is 100% effective. While more on the rare side, but yes you can get pregnant while on depo. And I'm talking from experience. I have a set of twins at home that I conceived while I was on depo. So, yeah, it happens."

-Sthandiwe: "What the f? But I hadn't missed my period. Yes, the last one came 2 days late but it came. How do you explain that?"

-Dr Mashinini: "Let me guess, it was lighter than usual and didn't last long."

-Sthandiwe: "It's usually light but this time it was more lighter, and it lasted for 2 days instead of 3."

-Dr Mashinini: "You confused it with a period but it wasn't, it was what we call 'spotting'. It happens when..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "No, no, no. I don't wanna hear it."

She covered her face with her hands then removed them after a while. What was going through her mind was Chris. How was he going to take the news of her carrying another man's child while engaged to be married to him? Everything was just fucked up. And she thought "Hell, Chris is going to leave me when he hears about this baby."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm screwed. I'm really screwed...I felt all the changes, the sicknesses, mood swings, food aversions, but I thought it was just the side effects of the NSAIDs I was taking. But even when you prescribed new ones nothing changed, but I still thought they had the same side effects. I had no reason to think I was pregnant because I'm on injection and I thought I had my period. And now you're telling me this? This is fucked up. Really fucked up."

-Dr Mashinini: "I know you're shocked and probably a little scared, but it's gonna be okay. And I'm gonna want you to stop taking those NSAIDs. There are studies that show that taking some NSAIDs during early pregnancy can lead to miscarriage. So please stop taking them and..."

-Sthandiwe: (cutting her off) "Are you kidding me right now? You want me stop taking the tablets to protect this baby? Can't you see that I'm not happy about it? Can't you see that I don't want it? Doc, I want this baby out of my tummy. I want to terminate."

-Dr Mashinini: "Are you sure?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course I'm sure. I want this baby gone."

-Dr Mashinini: "But still, I'd advise you to go home and think about what you want to do very carefully. And if you still feel strongly about it next week, you can go ahead and terminate."

-Sthandiwe: (frustrated) "Grrrr! You're useless."

She took her bag and made her way to the door, pissed. And didn't give a fuck about no ultrasound or blood test.

-Dr Mashinini: "But in the meantime I want you to stop taking those pills."

-Sthandiwe: "I already have."

She said that already walking out and banged the door behind her.

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She rushed to her car, got in and rested her head on the steering wheel. She was really screwed. She sat like that for about 10 minutes, crying. After a great deal of crying, she took her phone and called her best buddy, the only person she could be able to tell the whole thing to, KG. He answered.

-Sthandiwe: "KG, I need to see you. Now. Where are you?"

-KG: "Ummh...I'm in Rosebank and a little busy right now, ST. Can't we meet up later? This evening, maybe?"

-Sthandiwe: (crying again) "Kagiso, please. I really need to see you, right now. Please."

-KG: "Are you crying? Is everything okay, ST?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, it's not. Hence I wanna see you. I'm gonna drive to you right now. Meet me downstairs, just outside Palesa's apartment building. I don't wanna go inside."

KG agreed to see her. She hung up and paced her car to Rosebank.

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She got there and found KG already waiting for her. He got inside her car.

-KG: "Oh, wow. You look different...Anyway, what's going on?"

She told him everything about the pregnancy and that she wanted to terminate.

-KG: "No, no, no, ST. I love you, I really do, but I won't support you on this one. You know that I just lost my baby in the past few weeks, and now you're telling me that you want to kill yours? How insensitive can you be? That's an innocent life growing inside of you, ST, and I can't support you if you want to kill it."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, bro, I didn't think about your baby. I'm really sorry."

-KG: "My advice, keep that baby and tell Chris about it. If he really loves you, which I know he does, he'll accept you with it. I mean he knows all about Alizwa and what you two had or did, and you worked through it. You got past it. You'll work through this too, together."

-Sthandiwe: "You think so?"

-KG: "I know so. Chris loves you, ST. He loves you for who and what you are. Hence he gave you that ring on your finger right now...You don't have to hide anything from him. Be open with him and you'll both be fine."

Sthandiwe nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "You're right. I'll tell him. Thanks for the advice, bro."

-KG: "Anytime. Everything is gonna be okay. Okay?"

He hugged her.

-KG: "I love you, fool."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "I love YOU."

Then he opened the door to get out of the car but Sthandiwe stopped him.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, gazi, there's one more thing. I want to get rid of the hot guns that I have in my arsenal. I don't need them no more. Think you can help me with that?"

-KG: "Sure thing. Just give them to me when you can and I'll take care of them. And by that, I don't mean I'll keep them. I don't want them either."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks."

And with that KG got out of the car and returned to Palesa's apartment. It was now around 13:30. And Sthandiwe drove home.

But when she got home she found Alizwa waiting for her. His car was parked in the driveway. She got irked immediately, not in the mood to talk to him. She pulled up behind his car and rested her head on the steering wheel.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, God, please give me strength."

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What do you all think the "7" tatt Sthandiwe has means?

Insert #67

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This is thanks to Patrick Doyle. I'm able to type again because of, apart from God, you. Thank you, darling, for giving me a portion of your liver when mine was failing me.

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Sthandiwe took a deep breath then got out of her car. As she approached Alizwa's car, he rolled his window down.

-Sthandiwe: "Al, what are you doing here?"

-Alizwa: "Before you say anything, just know this: I'm not leaving here until you hear what I have to say. I'm tired of you brushing me off."

-Sthandiwe: "What do you want?"

-Alizwa: "Please get inside."

He was sitting in the back seat and Mel was behind the wheel.

-Alizwa: (quickly to Mel) "Melanie, please wait for me outside."

Mel got out of the car just as Sthandiwe was moving around to get in the right-hand side of the back seat. She sat next to Alizwa.

-Alizwa: "I love your new look. It's different but still beautiful. And those brown eyes, I could get..."

-Sthandiwe: (cutting him off) "Thanks. Now please get to the reason why you're here."

He just looked at her and smiled. He was so calm while she was so fuckin' bored and annoyed.

-Alizwa: "You need to calm down. You do not wanna raise your BP. HBP is not good for you at this point."

He said that calmly as he kept twirling his vaporiser between his fingers.

Instead of asking him what he meant by that, she:

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't know you were into vaping."

-Alizwa: "Clearly you don't know much about me. You don't even know that I know that you're pregnant."

Sthandiwe's eyes went wild, she wasn't planning on telling him about the pregnancy. Ever.

-Alizwa: "Yeah, I know that you're carrying my baby, Thandi."

She didn't know how to respond to that. She was just shocked that he knew. The only word that managed to escape her mouth was:

-Sthandiwe: "Oh."

-Alizwa: "Can't you see that this is fate, Thandi? We are meant to be together. This baby is proof of that. Proof of our love and that we belong together."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure your ex-wife has already been buried. Did you attend her funeral? Or the only thing you're good at is to annoy me."

-Alizwa: "I see what you're trying to do. You're trying to annoy me so I'd leave. But, baby, that's not gonna work. I'm not leaving here until we discuss this pregnancy... But I'm gonna answer your question anyway. Yes, I did attend the funeral. It was on Tuesday. She and her brother, that you shot and killed, got buried on the same day."

-Sthandiwe: "You're talking as if I intended to kill him."

-Alizwa: "Come on, Thandi, this is me you're talking to. I know that it was not self-defense. It was premeditated murder. But let's not talk about that. Let's not talk about anything that has to do with René. I want us to talk about us, our baby."

-Sthandiwe: "There is no us, Alizwa. You know that. This baby doesn't change anything. Pregnant or not, I still don't want you in my life. Why can't you just accept that and leave me alone?"

-Alizwa: "Thandi, please don't say that. You don't know how much your absence in my life hurts me. And when I learned that you're pregnant, my hopes got raised... I know it's crazy, but I stay up every night thinking about you and our baby. And hoping that you'd call and tell me about the pregnancy and that you're done fighting the feelings you have for me. I love you, Thandi. You and our baby. We are gonna..."

-Sthandiwe: "We're gonna do what? Raise the baby together? That's not gonna happen, Al. I'm not gonna raise no baby with you. Please don't do this to yourself. Stop dreaming."

-Alizwa: "So you want to raise my baby with Chris? Is that it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Who said anything of that sort? No one's gonna raise this baby, I'm terminating this pregnancy."

-Alizwa: "What? Hell no! Thandi, please don't do that. You know that I lost my son three years ago, and my then-wife couldn't conceive again. But now God has given me a chance to be a father again. And you want to take that away from me? Please don't do that, Thandi. You can't be that cruel."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess I can be. I don't want anything that's gonna tie me to you, Alizwa. So yes, I'm gonna go ahead with the abortion, it doesn't matter what you say."

-Alizwa: "I'm not gonna let you do that, Thandi. Hear me? I'm not gonna let you."

-Sthandiwe: "Let me? This is my body, Alizwa. I can do whatever I want. My body, my decision."

He grabbed her left arm and tightened his grip, his anger taking over.

-Alizwa: "I'm not gonna let you kill my baby, Thandi. I'm not gonna let you do that."

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, let go of my arm. You're hurting me."

He looked at the arm. Then his eyes trailed to her hand and noticed the engagement ring.

-Alizwa: "You're engaged?"

-Sthandiwe: "To Chris, yes."

He couldn't hide his hurt. It was visible in his eyes. And he slowly let go of her arm. He wanted to say something but a lump formed in his throat and no words could come out. He just stared at her with sad eyes. Sthandiwe was now feeling sorry for him but she just didn't want to show it. She got out of the car and walked to Mel who was standing at a distance, by the front porch.

-Sthandiwe: "Your full name is Melanie, right?"

Mel nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "Well, Melanie, the next time Alizwa asks you to drive him here please refuse. He's really becoming a nuisance."

Mel just nodded and walked back to Alizwa's car. She got in and drove off.

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Sthandiwe got inside the house and went to get some cold water from the fridge. As she was still drinking that, she heard the doorbell. She put the glass down and went to open the door. At the door she found Sihle with her son.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, guys."

-Sihle: "Hey, chomi."

They looked so cute in their mother and son matching outfits. Sthandiwe looked at Sihle then at her son, then back at her again without saying a word. Seeing Sihle's son made her think about the baby that was growing in her tummy. Asking herself, once again, if she should keep it or go ahead with the abortion. Her train of thoughts got derailed by:

-Sihle: "Chomi, are you gonna let us in or what?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, yeah...yeah, yeah, come on in."

They walked inside.

-Sihle: "Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just coming down with something. I think it's flu."

-Sihle: "I've been calling you. Why aren't you taking my calls? You do know that today we were supposed to go to the vehicle registration authority to change the ownership of the car you bought for me, right?"

Sthandiwe hit her forehead with the palm of her hand.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, no. I'm sorry, chomi, I completely forgot about it. I just got a little busy with something else. (she checked her wristwatch) And it's already late now. It's a little before three and they close at three."

-Sihle: "But tomorrow is still another day, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. We can go there first thing in the morning."

-Sihle: "Then tomorrow it is...But are you sure you're okay?"

She could see that her friend was not okay.

-Sthandiwe: "What are you talking about, chomi? Of course I'm okay."

She couldn't tell her about the pregnancy, not before she tells Chris.

-Sthandiwe: (quickly) "Let's all go to the kitchen for something to drink, and an ice cream for this little guy."

Sihle's son smiled.

They went to the kitchen and Sthandiwe gave the little guy Magnum then poured some drink for Sihle.

-Sihle: "What's happening with your own car? Your insurance company hasn't paid out yet?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nope. Still the waiting game."

-Sihle: "But I'm sure they will pay out soon."

Then they continued chatting about other stuff until Sihle and her son left, around 16:00.

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After they left, Sthandiwe went upstairs to change into something more comfortable. She put on her summer PJs and morning shoes then went downstairs to lock the front door. She didn't want any visitors, she just wanted to be alone and think things through.

She went to the kitchen and took out an unopened 2l tub of ice cream. She grabbed a spoon then went to sit on the couches and dug in.

The possibility of losing Chris over her pregnancy just wouldn't leave her mind. But she made her final decision. She was going to fly to Cape Town the following day to talk to him. To tell him about the pregnancy, then see what happens and take it from there.

And once she was certain about what she wanted to do, she went to put the empty ice cream tub in the trash can then went upstairs to her study. She got herself a flight online then went back downstairs to watch some TV. But she ended up falling asleep on the couch. She got woken up by KG's knock on her front door. She bolted upright and checked her watch. It was a little after 19:00 and it was already dark in the house.

KG kept knocking but she ignored him. She was just in no mood to talk.

-KG: "Come on, ST, I know that you're in. I can hear the TV. Come on open up."

She didn't answer, she just plopped back on the couch again and closed her eyes.

-KG: "Okay, I'm leaving. I'm gonna leave BB's guitar right here on the doorstep."

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Yeah, do that."

She waited about 30 minutes before she went to open the door and take the guitar. She wanted to make sure that KG was really gone before opening, and he was.

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She took the guitar. But as she was about to go back inside, Xolisa's car pulled up in her driveway. She still didn't feel like talking to anyone but she couldn't run back inside, he had already seen her. So she stood there, on her doorstep, and waited for him. He got out of the car and rushed up to her, looking all kinds of freaked out.

-Sthandiwe: "XO, what's going on? You look like you've just seen a ghost, man."

-Xolisa: "I might as well have seen one. Things are bad, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "What's bad? What are you talking about, XO?"

-Xolisa: "Let's please go inside, I'll tell you everything."

They got inside and went to sit on the couches.

-Xolisa: "Uncle Melusi is dead. My father shot him right in front of me, Thandi. Right in front of me."

Melusi was the uncle that raped Minenhle.

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "Huh?"

-Xolisa: "My dad got really mad after seeing that video yesterday. He was spitting fire and wanted to deal with uncle Melusi on his own. So this morning we drove to his house but we couldn't find him. Apparently, he packed his things last night and left with his family. But we managed to track him down and found him in Mamelodi. When we got there, my father dragged his ass to our car then drove to Vaal. That's where he shot him. He shot him multiple times right in front of me."

Sthandiwe was listening in horror.

-Sthandiwe: "Yoh, I really didn't think he'd take that route. I thought he was gonna seek justice for Minnie legally."

-Xolisa: "He surprised me too. I didn't think he would take it that far. I really didn't."

-Sthandiwe: "If I didn't know better I'd think you're actually feeling sorry for that dead bastard."

-Xolisa: "No, not really. I'm just freaked out. Thandi, I've never seen anyone being killed in front of me. I've never seen that kind of shit before. That's what's freaking me out."

-Sthandiwe: "And it still gonna haunt you, man. That image is not gonna leave your head anytime soon... I don't mean to be blunt, but it's the truth, buddy. Once you see that sh*t, you can't really un-see it. And I'm talking from experience. But you'll be okay eventually. So don't worry."

She said that patting his shoulder.

-Xolisa: "I hope you're right."

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I'm right...I really don't feel sorry for that Melusi bastard. He got what he deserved. And now Minnie can come home assured that the asshole that raped her is never going to torment her again, he's dead...Hope your father covered his tracks though. Is he covered?"

-Xolisa: "Ummh...I think so. No one saw us getting him into our car. His family was not there at the time. And I'm the only one who witnessed the shooting. I'm sure of it."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good then."

They contued talking for sometime, Sthandiwe calming him down. By the time he left, he was feeling a little better. Sthandiwe went upstairs to bed.

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In the morning, she woke up and got ready. Then Sihle arrived and they went to Boksburg to register the car.

It was Friday and she also had to go see the Detective that was handling the case of Ethan's death. So after they left Boksburg, she drove to Brixton as Sihle drove home in her new car. She got to the police station and the Detective took her to an interrogation room.

-Detective: "So you say you didn't know Ethan Parker?"

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't. The only Parker I know, I mean knew, because she's also dead now, was Reneé. And I think she's related to this Ethan. I mean that would make sense. It would explain why he wanted to kill me."

-Detective: "They were actually siblings. And I heard that Reneé had a heart attack in a holding cell down in Booyens Police Station. What was your relationship with her?"

-Sthandiwe: "I once dated her husband, but of course I had no idea that he was married at the time. But when I found out, I ended things with him. But he still left Reneé anyway. And that's when she started to hate me. Accusing me of ruining her marriage....So I think she sent her brother to kill me for that reason."

-Detective: "And your house key? How did he get hold of it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, the husband, had a copy of that key when we were still dating and he never brought it back when we ended things. So I think that's how Reneé got hold of it...Detective, am I in trouble? Am I gonna be charged?"

-Detective: "No, not at all. We've looked at it and we're sure that it was a case of self-defense. Even the office of the prosecutor agrees with us...So, miss, we're done here. You can go home now."

-Sthandiwe: "For real?"

-Detective: "Yes. I only called you in because I wanted to be sure."

-Sthandiwe: "Uh, thank you, Detective. The last thing I wanted was to find myself in a corner for defending myself."

She got up and left. She drove back home and packed a few things then went to the airport. And she boarded her flight to Cape Town.

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She landed in Cape Town by 16:30 and Chris went to pick her up.

On the way:

-Chris: "You really look beautiful in that hairstyle, sthandwa sam."

-Sthandiwe: "C'mon, babe, you're saying that for the third time now."

-Chris: "That's because it really suits you. And it's my job to compliment you."

She just let out a weak smile. The thought of losing this wonderful, loving guy was rotating in her head, unsettling her.

They drove home in comfortable silence. And immediately when they got into the apartment, Sthandiwe took his hand and led him to the couches. They sat down and she got down to the reason for her visit. She didn't want to waste any time.

-Sthandiwe: "There's something I want to tell you, Chris. And it might change things between us but I will tell you anyway. I don't want to keep anything from you, Motaung."

-Chris: "Okay, this sounds serious. What's going on?"

She didn't beat around the bush, she went straight to the point.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, I just found out that I'm pregnant. I'm carrying Alizwa's baby."

But she didn't get the reaction she expected from Chris. The revelation didn't seem to have shocked him, not even at the slightest.

-Sthandiwe: "Babe, please say something... If you want to drop me because of this, I'll understand. But I want you to know that I love you, Chris, and losing you would be like losing my own heart. I can't..."

-Chris: (interrupting) "I was aware...of your pregnancy, I mean."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "What? All this time you knew about this pregnancy?"

-Chris: "I didn't exactly know, I just had my suspicions. All that nausea and vomiting, the food cravings and aversions. I suspected that you're pregnant but I didn't wanna say anything. After all you're the woman here and you know your body better than I do. So I couldn't really be sure."

-Sthandiwe: "You had suspicions but still went ahead and proposed to me? Knowing very well that I could be carrying another man's baby?"

-Chris: "Yes. I told you, Thandi, that I love you and nothing would ever scare me away from you, not even this pregnancy. I know that you got pregnant when we were going through a rough patch, but we got past that, and I don't want us to go back there. I can't keep giving you a hard time about things that happened during that period. Alizwa is no longer in your life so why would I trip about this pregnancy? He is out of your life, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, of course. But I'm not hearing you, Chris. What are you saying? Are you saying you accept me with this baby? That you're willing to raise it with me?"

-Chris: "I'm saying I love all of you, and that includes that precious being growing inside of your tummy... I don't know but maybe abortion has crossed your mind at some point. But I wouldn't want you to do that, babe. All babies are gifts from God and they all deserve to be given a chance at life and be loved. It doesn't matter who the father of that baby is or how it was conceived, what matters is that it needs to live. And I'm gonna be in his or her life all the way. But on one condition."

Sthandiwe was smiling as he talked but as soon as he mentioned a condition, her smile faded.

-Sthandiwe: "What's the condition?"

-Chris: "I don't want Alizwa anywhere near you or that baby."

-Sthandiwe: "That's all?"

-Chris: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Then that's nothing. You got it, babe. You got it. I also don't want Alizwa anywhere near us."

She kissed him.

-Sthandiwe: "You're amazing, Chris. Really amazing. And I'm lucky to have you."

-Chris: "I consider myself the lucky one...I love you, Thandi. I really do."

-Sthandiwe: "And once again you just assured me of that. I love you too, sthandwa sam."

They kissed again.

-Chris: "Okay, now let me go take a shower, then we can make dinner together."

He got up and went to the bedroom with his work briefcase and Sthandiwe's weekend bag. Leaving Sthandiwe taking a sigh of relief. She couldn't believe how he received the pregnancy news. How he had taken it.

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After the shower, they went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. They had fun in that kitchen. Laughing, making all that cooking process fun. The pregnancy sure hadn't changed anything between them. Chris' feelings for his fiancée hadn't changed at all.

After they were done, they sat down at the table to eat. But Alizwa's sister, Yandisa, kept calling, disturbing their peaceful dinner. Sthandiwe kept ignoring the calls but she wouldn't stop calling. So Sthandiwe ended up turning the phone off. They had their dinner in peace then went to bed.

In the morning, Sthandiwe woke up before Chris. He was sleeping so peacefully so she didn't want to wake him. She just took her phone and turned it on. As soon as it was on, several messages came through - text messages and voice messages. She listened to the number of voice messages but only one captured her attention. It was from Yandisa telling her that Alizwa was in hospital. Apparently he had tried to drive his car, going to see Sthandiwe, and he got into an accident.

That freaked Sthandiwe out immediately and she called Yandisa back. She asked how Alizwa was doing and how bad the accident was. Yandisa told her that the accident was bad and that Alizwa was in a critical condition.

The call woke Chris up and he looked at her. When she hung he asked what was going on. She told him as she was already getting out of bed in a hurry.

-Chris: "And now? Where are you going? It's still early."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, babe, but I gotta go back to Gauteng. I have to see Alizwa."

-Chris: (in disbelief) "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "I feel bad about what's happened to him, Chris. So I really need to go. I have to see him."

She said that already disappearing into the bathroom. Leaving Chris astonished. What the hell was that? Just the day before, didn't she say she didn't want Alizwa anywhere near her?

Insert #68 (Crop Top)

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Sthandiwe got to the bathroom and went to brush her teeth before taking the shower. When she was done and rinsing her toothbrush, Chris walked in and stood in the doorway.

-Chris: "What exactly is going on with you, Sthandiwe? Didn't we talk about Alizwa yesterday?"

Sthandiwe turned to look at him. He was calling her by her full name and in that case that meant only one thing: he was really mad at her.

-Sthandiwe: (barely audible) "We did."

-Chris: "So what is this now?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know I said I don't want him anywhere near me but, Chris, things are different now."

-Chris: "Sthandiwe, I'm gonna ask you to be honest right now. Do you still have feelings for that guy?"

-Sthandiwe: "What? No. Of course not. But if I'm being frank, a part of me still cares about him. I care about him just as someone I used to be close with. Nothing more, nothing less. And now that he's in hospital I feel like I have to go see him. After all I'm the one who told Melanie to refuse to drive him to my house whenever he asks her to. And she did. Now look what happened. He drove himself and landed in hospital. I blame myself for that, Chris, I do. That's why I wanna see him. Plus he..."

-Chris: (finishing her sentence) "...is the father of your baby, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "That's not what I was going to say. I was going to say the guy was there for me when I needed help. He was willing to sacrifice his life just to save mine, Chris. The least I can do is to go see him in his time of need."

-Chris: "Then I won't stand in your way. Do what you have to do, Sthandiwe. Go see him but know this: if you walk out that door you'll be walking out on me, you'll be walking out on us."

And with that he turned around and went back to the bedroom. Sthandiwe stood there thinking about what he just said. The more she thought about it the more she understood where he was coming from. By wanting to go see her ex she was disrespecting him, completely. She made up her mind then went back to the bedroom. She found him back under the covers. She sat at the bottom of the bed and just spoke even though he was fully covered and not even seeing her.

-Sthandiwe: "Sthandwa sam, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I just let guilt get the better of me. I feel guilty about what happened to Alizwa. I feel like I am to blame. I let that control my mind and I didn't consider your feelings. I'm sorry. Hurting you or disrespecting you is the last thing I wanted to do. I love you, babe. You're the most important man in my life and fighting with you hurts me. So I'm not going. I'm not going to see Alizwa. I'm gonna be right here and spend the weekend with you - the man I love."

All that time Chris was just lying still, not even showing that he was listening to her. She too wasn't expecting him to respond. She didn't wait for his response, she just got up.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you and I'm sorry, sthandwa sam. Please come and join me in the kitchen when you're ready."

And with that she went to put on her robe and went to the bathroom to wash her face and hands then went to the kitchen to make some breakfast. Chris came when she was about done. He hugged her from behind and kissed her neck.

-Chris: "Thanks for not going. And I hope we will never have a conversation of that nature again."

-Sthandiwe: "We won't. I promise."

Then they sat down at the breakfast table and had their breakfast over light conversation.

They indeed spent the weekend together, going out a lot, Chris showing her around Cape Town. They really had a great time together, a memorable weekend. And on Monday, in the morning, she boarded her flight back to Jo'burg. Saying goodbye was the most difficult thing to do for the both of them. But they had to, well until they see each other again.

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She got to Jo'burg at 11:15 and went to get her car then drove straight to work. The September break was over and it was back to work. As soon as she got to her office she called KG and asked how his first day at work was. And KG being KG he was doing okay and he was excited, loving the challenges that came with the new job.

And when she hung up, a call from Sihle came through. She was excited, telling her that she had just got a call from one of Jo'burg's leading newspapers for an interview on Wednesday of that week. And Sthandiwe couldn't hold in her excitement. She was really happy for her friend, hoping that this time she would get the job. It was about time she got hired. Sitting at home, with no job, was really taking a toll on her, especially because her friends were all working.

After that call Sthandiwe started doing some admin work in her office, she didn't conduct any lectures that day. She hated admin work but that day she didn't mind doing it. She was having a good day and nothing was going to ruin her mood. Her friends were happy and their happiness was hers.

After she was done with her work for the day, she went to see Xolisa in his office and he was doing okay than the last time she saw him. Minenhle was back home and he couldn't be more happier. It was really a good day but it was already approaching its end. She left Xolisa's office around 16:45 and went to her car. As soon as she got in, Yandisa called. She was asking, in fact pleading with her to go see Alizwa in hospital. Saying he really needed her. But when she asked what hospital he was in, she told her to come to her apartment so they'd go see him together. Without even thinking twice or about how Chris would feel about that, she agreed. So from that parking lot she drove straight to Pretoria, to Yandisa's apartment. She got there and buzzed downstairs, Mel let her in. But when she went up to the apartment and knocked on the door, she got surprised - Alizwa opened the door.

Insert #69

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Alizwa just stood there with his walking stick, he was off the wheelchair. And from the look on his scratched face, he was also surprised to see Sthandiwe there. A moment passed with them just staring at each other, both surprised. Then:

-Alizwa: "Thandi. I must say I'm surprised to see you here after what you said the last time."

-Sthandiwe: "Is this supposed to be a joke?"

-Alizwa: "You tell me."

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, I don't have time for your sick games. What's going on here?"

-Alizwa: "What are you talking about?"

-Sthandiwe: "What am I talking about? Alizwa, your sister called me on Friday, saying you got involved in a car accident and that you were in a critical condition in hospital. Today she called again asking me to come here so we could go visit you in hospital together. She said you needed me. But to my surprise here you are, standing right in front of me, not in hospital. So what the hell's going on?"

-Alizwa: "Yandisa called you and told you that?"

He asked looking genuinely shocked.

-Sthandiwe: "That's what I just said, isn't it?"

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry you had to come all this way for a lie. And I want you to know that I had nothing to do with it. I didn't ask Yandisa to call you. I may get crazy sometimes when it comes to you but trust me, I'm not that childish or insane. I had nothing to do with this. I'm just as shocked as you are."

-Sthandiwe: "So there was no car accident?"

-Alizwa: "There was. But it was just a minor thing. I couldn't control the car and I ended up hitting a lamp post. When Mel refused to drive me to your place I decided to drive myself, but I wasn't ready. My leg and arm still need some healing. But like I just said, the accident was nothing major. I only got a couple of scratches and bruising because of the airbag. Nothing to call my ex about, really."

-Sthandiwe: "So I came here for nothing. I hate that. I really hate it when people make a fool of me. Tell your sister that."

-Alizwa: "She's not even home right now. But I'd like to apologise on her behalf."

-Sthandiwe: "Apology not accepted."

And with that she turned to leave. But Alizwa grabbed her arm. She stopped then turned around. Alizwa was still standing in the doorway and she was standing right in front of him, in the corridor.

-Sthandiwe: "What do you think you're doing?"

-Alizwa: "You're already here so you might as well hear what I wanted to say to you on Friday when I drove to your house and ended up getting into that accident."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't wanna hear it."

-Alizwa: "Please stop with the drama and come inside."

Sthandiwe looked around, unsure, but ended up going inside. They went to sit in the lounge.

-Alizwa: "After what I did to you, I probably don't deserve your forgiveness, ever. I deserve the rejection and the heartache. But I don't deserve not being given a chance to be a father to my kid. Thandi, that is my baby you're carrying. He's not only yours, he's mine too. So I have a say in..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "He?"

-Alizwa: "I know it's a boy. I can feel it. And I won't let you kill him, Thandi. I won't. And you won't raise him with Chris either. You want to play happy families with him? Cool. But not with my baby. Chris will play daddy to my son over my dead body."

-Sthandiwe: "Correct me if I'm wrong but from where I'm sitting that sounds like a threat. And I don't take kindly to threats."

-Alizwa: "I may not know where I stand with you but I know what a threat is. And this is not it. It's a promise."

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "Wow."

She got up.

-Sthandiwe: "So on Friday you were driving to my house just to tell me this? You must be really bored. I'm out of here."

She made for the door. Alizwa tried to stop her but she rushed out of that apartment and made strides to the elevator then to her car. She got inside her car and sat behind the wheel, taking in what just happened.

-Sthandiwe: "These people are so fuckin' unbelievable."

She took out her phone and blocked both Alizwa and Yandisa's numbers. Then she deleted that song Alizwa wrote for her from her phone. She tossed her phone aside then started the car and drove home.

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In Cape Town, that evening. Chris was with Zach and a couple of other guys, their friends, in Zach's man cave in his home, watching a game of soccer. Chris' phone rang but he ignored it and focused on

the game. It rang again and he checked the display. He didn't recognise the number but he decided to step outside and answer the call.

-Chris: "Hello."

-Caller: "Chris, it's Alizwa. I still have your number. Remember I told you I got it from KG?"

-Chris: "Yeah. What do you want?"

-Alizwa: "You're the one who's been putting crazy ideas in Thandi's head, isn't it?"

-Chris: "Crazy ideas?"

-Alizwa: "You want her to abort my baby because you know that I'll always be in her life if that baby lives. You're threatened by me. But lemme tell you..."

-Chris: (cutting him off) "Not that I have to respond to this crap, but if abortion is what Thandi wants then that's her decision. She's made it on her own, I had nothing to do with it. She's a grown woman after all, she's capable of making her own decisions."

-Alizwa: "And you expect me to believe that? You put your stupid ring on her finger, meaning you think she's gonna be your wife soon. So it's fair to think that you now take such decisions together... But I'll tell you this, Chris, there will be no wedding and my baby will live. Thandi is not yours and she'll never be yours."

And with that he hung up. Leaving Chris looking at his phone, stunned.

-Chris: (shaking his head) "This guy is crazy, seriously."

He put his phone back in his pocket and got back inside the man cave. He caught up on the game with the guys and completely forgot about Alizwa and his crazy call.

But when he got to his apartment later it all came back to him. And the more he thought about it, the more it infuriated him. So he called Sthandiwe and told her about it. Sthandiwe told him to just ignore him. But Chris wouldn't. He wanted to go back to Gauteng, meet up with Alizwa and give him a piece of his mind.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, that's not necessary. You don't have to do that."

-Chris: "It is necessary, Thandi."

-Sthandiwe: "My love, if you do that you'd be stooping low to his level. Just let him be. Let's just keep our distance from him and only deal with him when and if he comes straight to us with his bullshit."

-Chris: "No, Thandi. The guy has disrespected me long enough. I need to have a talk with him, man to man, and put a stop to this bullshit."

There was no convincing him otherwise, his mind was made up. So Sthandiwe just let him be. They hung up and went to bed with one common thing in their minds - Alizwa.

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The following day, Sthandiwe woke up and got ready for work. She had her breakfast then took her things to her car and drove to campus. On the way she could see a car that looked like it was following her but she brushed it off by saying she was just being paranoid, no one would want to follow her. But that afternoon after work, she felt like she was being followed again. She went to Pick n' Pay to do some grocery shopping and that feeling just wouldn't leave her even inside the supermarket. But every time she looked around she wouldn't see anyone that looked like they could be tailing her. She went to pay for the groceries and went home. But even when she was home, the thought of having a tail bothered her. And she thought of one person who could do that, Greg. He was still in hospital but he could have sent someone else.

She went to get her laptop from her car and went to sit in the living room. She accessed Greg's confession video then sent it to her phone and forwarded it to Greg's number. With the caption: "If orange is not your colour, call your dogs off my tail." Then she went upstairs, took a shower and went to bed even though it was still early, around 19:30. Around 20:00 Chris called and told her that she'd be in Jo'burg the following day, on a Wednesday. He couldn't even wait for the weekend, he wanted to see Alizwa and sort him out once and for all. Even though Sthandiwe didn't want him to do that, she couldn't change his mind.

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In the morning, she didn't feel like waking up at all, sick as fuck. She forced herself up and made her way to the bathroom to take a shower but she couldn't. She was feeling light-headed and she kept throwing up into the toilet. So she ended up calling Prof Jansen and told him that she won't make it to work. Then she went back to bed and slept.

She got up around 13:00, feeling better and craving some pizza. She made her bed then went to take a shower. She got dressed and decided to put on her Kevlar vest under her jacket, just in case her tail decides to take things to another level and pull a trigger on her. She went to Debonairs, got her pizza and went back home without feeling like she was being watched or followed. Clearly Greg got her message loud and clear.

She got home and went to sit in the kitchen and devoured her pizza with juice. Then she went to sit in the lounge and watched some movies while having some chocolate and ice cream. Chris was going to arrive in the evening.

At 18:10 he indeed touched the Jo'burg ground. He didn't even go home, he took a cab and went straight to Sthandiwe's house. He got there and Sthandiwe let him in.

-Sthandiwe: "My love."

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam."

They hugged. Then went to the kitchen. He went straight to the fridge, took out bottled water and gulped it down. Sthandiwe looked on.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, slow down. You'll choke on it."

-Chris: "I'm doing this because this whole thing is stressing me out."

-Sthandiwe: "This whole thing?"

-Chris: "Yes. That baby growing inside your belly, Alizwa, you, everything."

-Sthandiwe: "Me? Really, Chris?"

-Chris: "Thandi, are you certain that you're done with Alizwa? Are you absolutely sure that you don't want him in your life?"

-Sthandiwe: "But how many times must I answer this same question, Chris? How many?"

-Chris: "Thandi, if you had put that guy in his place when I asked you to, I wouldn't be standing here asking you this same question. That guy wouldn't have had the guts to call me and tell me the bullshit he told me. He got the grounds from you, Thandi. From you. Obviously you're the one who keeps giving him hope and sending him mixed signals. Clearly that ring on your finger means nothing to you."

-Sthandiwe: "But Chris, you're not being fair right now. In fact, I resent what you just said. How's this my fault? I haven't been sending him any mixed signals. I didn't..."

She got disturbed by a doorbell. And she left Chris standing there and went to open the door.

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Her mouth opened involuntarily when she found Alizwa at her doorstep.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, what are you doing here? I thought I made it perfectly clear to you that I don't ever wanna see you here."

-Alizwa: "Can I please come in?"

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, what do you want from me? What do you want? Didn't you say it all?"

Chris was still in the kitchen but he could hear that it was Alizwa at the door and he rushed to the lounge.

-Chris: "And then? What are you doing here?"

-Alizwa: "You better stay out of this, sport. I'm not here for you, I'm here to talk to the mother of my baby."

-Chris: "I don't like the tone of your voice. You can't come here and..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "It's okay, Chris. Let's hear what he has to say."

-Alizwa: "I'm not talking in front of him."

-Chris: "That's too bad 'cause I'm not going anywhere. Say your piece and I'll say mine. I wanted to talk to you anyway, so you've saved me the trip to Pretoria."

-Alizwa: "I've got nothing to say to you, pal. And I don't want to hear anything from you. So if you know what's good for you, you'll step back and let me talk to the mother of my son."

-Chris: "If I know what's good for me? Is that a threat?"

-Alizwa: "And if it is, what are you gonna do? Huh? What are you gonna do? Boy, you better know your place."

The "boy" part infuriated Chris.

-Chris: "What was that? What did you just call me?"

He charged towards him ready to punch him in the face but Sthandiwe intervened. She stepped in between them.

-Sthandiwe: "Let's all calm down, shall we? Please."

-Chris: "Thandi, please step aside. Let me deal with this guy. He's fucking with me and I don't appreciate it."

-Sthandiwe: "Sthandwa sam, please calm down. He's not worth it. Kea o kopa, Motaung, motlhohele. I'm begging you, just leave him."

Chris retreated. He tried to calm himself down as he stepped back. Sthandiwe turned to look at Alizwa.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, please leave my house this moment. And I don't ever wanna see your face again. Forget about me and about this baby."

-Alizwa: "Is that what you really want?"

-Sthandiwe: "I mean every word."

-Alizwa: "Thandi, please don't say that. I love you."

That perturbed Chris.

-Chris: "Seriously, man, just love yourself enough to know when to give up."

-Alizwa: "Okay, I've had it with you. I've told you to shut up, haven't I? I'm not talking to you."

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, just leave. Please go."

-Alizwa: "Thandi, I believe you went to my place on Monday because you still care about me. So are you really sure you wanna choose him over me?"

-Sthandiwe: "I am. I love him and I'm gonna marry him."

-Alizwa: "Then you leave me no choice."

And in a speed of lightning, he pulled out a gun from his waist, pointed it to Chris and pulled the trigger.

-Sthandiwe: (screaming) "Chris, no!"

Insert #70

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Never underestimate the power of adrenaline in your body. You'd be amazed at the things you can actually do when you are in fight-or-flight mode.

That's exactly what was activated in Sthandiwe. Her protective instinct kicked in instantly, and as she screamed "Chris, no!", she jumped in front of the bullet so it wouldn't hit him. And indeed it didn't. It went straight to her own chest and she went down. Chris didn't even scream, his eyes just went wide and his mouth opened. He was still caught up in a state of shock, unable to even move. Alizwa realised what he just did - he had just shot the woman he loved, the mother of his baby. That got to him but he quickly recovered, he shrugged it off in a couple of seconds and continued with his mission. It was as if he was possessed or something, he just wanted Chris dead and his mind was focused on that, nothing else. He pointed the gun to Chris and pulled the trigger once again. But when he pulled it, Chris had now recovered from the shock, his mind had registered what had just happened to Sthandiwe. And he was going down to check her when the bullet hit his left shoulder. Alizwa was actually aiming for the chest but Chris' movement made him miss.

Chris staggered back, already falling into the abyss of shock, as he stared at his fiancée's ex who had just shot him. Then he dropped to the floor. The whole thing happened so fast but to the 3 that was involved, it felt like it was happening in slow motion.

As soon as Chris hit the floor, Alizwa rushed to the door and got out of there. He hurried to his car, well Yandisa's, and got in the back seat. A now hysterical Mel was behind the wheel. She had heard the gun shots and knew that some bad shit was happening inside but she was too scared to do anything about it.

-Alizwa: (quickly) "Mel, drive."

But Mel was still shaking on her seat, and she could see that Alizwa was the shooter, the gun was still in his hand.

-Mel: (anxious) "What...what have you done?"

-Alizwa: (forcefully) "Melanie, I said drive."

Without saying another word, she started the engine and drove off like a mad woman, realising that she was now an accomplice to what could possibly be a murder.

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As their car skid off, KG was arriving in his - coming to collect the guns Sthandiwe said she wanted to get rid off and to also get an update about the pregnancy issue. He didn't recognise the car but he could see that something was wrong from the way it drove off. And he had heard Alizwa's last gun shot as he was approaching but he didn't know where it was coming from. But now that he was seeing the car driving off like that he was certain that the gunshot came from inside Sthandiwe's house and he freaked out instantly. He 180'd in front of the entrance, leaped out of the car and rushed to the front door, leaving the car door open behind him. He barged in the house and saw Chris and Sthandiwe on the floor in the lounge. Chris was bleeding from the shoulder wound but he was moving, trying to get up. That to KG was a sign that he was at least alive, so he ignored him and rushed to Sthandiwe who was lying still on the floor.

-KG: "ST. ST!"

He was seeing no blood coming out of her, he frantically patted her torso trying to see where the wound was. Nothing. He quickly opened her jacket and noticed the 9mm hollow-point round trapped on her Kevlar vest. It had not penetrated its back lining. He let out a sigh of relief, and Sthandiwe was now coming to. She was gasping for air and panicking, thinking about what Alizwa might have done to Chris.

-Sthandiwe: "Al...Alizwa sho..shot..."

KG didn't want her to talk.

-KG: "It's okay. It's okay, he's gone. It's me, KG."

-Sthandiwe: "Chri...Chris."

As KG was about to answer, Chris answered for himself as he sat up straight.

-Chris: "I'm okay. KG, how's she?"

-Sthandiwe: "I can't...I can't breathe."

-KG: "It's okay, the bullet didn't go through the Kevlar lining."

She was trying to get up, still gasping for air. But KG pushed her back down.

-KG: "Relax. You may have a collapsed lung. Try not to move."

She looked over at Chris.

-Sthandiwe: "He's...he's bleeding."

-Chris: "I'll be fine. KG, please call an ambulance."

KG noticed that he was losing a lot of blood.

-KG: "No, the ambulance will take time, I'll take you to the hospital myself."

He went to him, helped him get up and supported him as he walked him outside to his car. He put him in the back seat then went back inside the house. He found Sthandiwe already up and ripping the Kevlar vest that saved her life off of her body. KG came to stand before her.

-KG: "You may think you're fine but you are also going to the hospital to be checked out. And that's not up for discussion."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm only going for Chris. Now move out of the way."

They both rushed out of the house and got in the car. KG sped off. Chris was bleeding severely, losing a lot of blood. So Sthandiwe took off her T-shirt, leaving herself only with a bra and camisole, and used it to put pressure on Chris' wound. When they got to the hospital, Chris had already passed out.

He got attended to immediately. And KG insisted that Sthandiwe be attended to as well. As they all left, KG was left calling Palesa to tell her about what had happened. Then Xolisa and Sihle.

It was a little before 20:00 but they all dropped everything they were doing and rushed to the hospital.

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In the room Sthandiwe was being examined in. She was giving the doctor a hard time, getting off the bed, wanting to get out of there.

-Doctor: "Miss, you have to remain here. I can't know if the ribs are not broken without an x-ray. You do not want that lung to collapse."

-Sthandiwe: "Trust me, doc, my ribs are not broken. I just need to get out of here and go see Chris, the guy I came in with."

-Doctor: "Your boyfriend is still in surgery, there's nothing you can do for him now. Just wait here to be taken for the x-ray."

-Sthandiwe: "Fiancé."

The doctor looked confused.

-Sthandiwe: "He's my fiancé not boyfriend. And my ribs are fine, I don't need no x-ray. What I need is for you to get out of my way. NOW!"

All she wanted was to see her man, the doctor was just giving her headache. He decided to step aside and let her be.

-Sthandiwe: "Where is he?"

He told her and she rushed out of the room to the OR Chris was said to be in. She stood by the door and peeked through the glass panel. She watched as he was being worked on. And found tears escaping her eyes. He was going to be okay but the thought of him coming that close to dying was making her emotional. As she wiped the tears off, she heard a voice behind her.

-Voice: "Thandi."

She turned to see Palesa standing with KG in the corridor.

-Sthandiwe: "Lisa."

-Palesa: "Thandi, what happened? Why is my brother here?"

She told her what happened and how it happened.

-Palesa: "So what you're telling me is that this is your fault."

-Sthandiwe: "My fault?"

-Palesa: "Yes, Thandi. It is your fault. It's your maniac ex that shot my brother."

-Sthandiwe: "So? Did I ask him to do it? Did I? I don't control what Alizwa does, Palesa."

-Palesa: "If you had respected my brother enough and kept your distance from Alizwa, I doubt this would have happened. You kept entertaining him, that's why he lost it when he learned that you really chose Chris over him. You did this to my brother, Thandi. You've put him in danger...again."

Sthandiwe couldn't believe what she just said.

-Sthandiwe: "Wow....so much for being my friend. But it's okay. It's okay, go ahead and blame me, Palesa. Blame me for everything if it makes you feel better."

KG decided to intervene.

-KG: (to Palesa) "Baby, please, calm yourself down. You can't blame ST for what happened. Alizwa is a pathetic psycho that couldn't accept defeat, that's why this happened. How is that ST's fault?"

-Palesa: "No, Kagiso, if Thandi..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "You know what, Palesa? Go to hell."

She said that already walking away.

-KG: "Baby, Thandi is your friend. You're supposed to have her back no matter what. You should not be attacking her right now. If anything, you should stand with her against Alizwa. Isn't that what the "Strong Six", that you personally came up with, stands for? Unity? Alizwa is the enemy here, not ST."

-Palesa: "Please, Kagiso, stop. Stop with your stupid lecture. The only person I'm concerned about right now is my brother."

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Sthandiwe went to join Xolisa and Sihle in the waiting area. They asked if she was okay and how everything happened. She narrated the story again, and they both just kept quiet and stared at her. That look meant one thing, they were also blaming her. Judging her. She was about to give them a piece of her mind when KG and Palesa came to them.

-KG: "Did they check you, ST? Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "KG, I'm fine."

-KG: "And the baby? Is it fine too?"

They all reacted to that.

-Palesa: (looking at KG) "The baby? What baby?"

-Sihle: "Is Thandi pregnant?"

They both asked as if Sthandiwe wasn't there. KG didn't answer, he just looked at Sthandiwe, realising that he had just let a cat that didn't belong to him out of the bag.

Sthandiwe didn't answer either, she kept quiet, annoyed by the fact that they were not directing their questions to her. They just asked as if she wasn't present.

-Xolisa: "Thandi, are you expecting?"

She decided to answer. Only because he was directing the question to her.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, I am pregnant."

-Sihle: "And why didn't you tell us?"

-Palesa: "There's only one reason that could make her keep this from us. That baby is not my brother's, it's Alizwa's."

-Sihle: "Is that true, Thandi?"

-Sthandiwe: "It is. And I was gonna tell you all but I was still figuring things out. And yes, Chris knows about it and he has no problem with it."

At the same time, Sihle and Xolisa covered their faces with their hands.

-Palesa: "What? That's bullshit. (she looked at KG) And you, Kagiso, you knew about this and didn't see the need to tell me?"

-KG: "It wasn't my place to tell you."

-Sthandiwe: "Seeing how judgemental y'all are, I don't regret not telling you. I thought you were all my friends, my family. So what is this now? Why are y'all judging me? Friends don't judge each other. I never judge any of you, I always have your backs. And I expected y'all to give me the same treatment. But clearly that's too much to ask."

She said the last part already getting up.

-Sthandiwe: "I need some water."

And with that she walked away. She didn't want to sit with them anymore. She couldn't believe or even understand their behaviour. She went to get the water then went to sit alone on another bench.

An hour later, the doctor came to update them about Chris' condition. It was only then that she went back to where the others were. Because she wanted to hear how Chris was doing.

-Sthandiwe: "Doctor, how's he?"

-Doctor: "Are you his family?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm his fiancée."

Palesa gave her a look.

-Palesa: "Doc, I'm his family. His sister. And these (pointing to Sihle, KG and Xolisa) are his close friends. You can talk freely in front of them."

-Doctor: "The bullet hit and damaged the major arteries in his shoulder, as a result he's lost a lot of blood. But we've removed the bullet and its fragments and repaired the damage. And we've given him blood transfusion, so he's gonna be okay. He's in his ward now. We're gonna keep him here for a couple of days or so."

-Palesa: "Thank you, doctor. Can we see him?"

-Doctor: "He's still a little woozy but y'all can go ahead and see him. But since there's 5 of you, I'll allow only 3 to go first then the other 2 will go in after that."

-Palesa: " That's okay, doc. Thanks. Kagiso and Sihle let's go."

Sthandiwe wanted to go see him immediately but she could see that his sister wouldn't have that, so for peace sake she backed off and just went to sit down on the bench and let them go in first. They went to go see him, leaving her and Xolisa behind. They both just sat there in complete, awkward silence. Sthandiwe saw it best to just kill time by playing games on her phone than to say anything to him. He didn't say anything either. He also just kept thumbing his phone.

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When their turn to go see Chris came, they went in.

They found him hooked up to an IV to hydrate his body. And another for blood was still on as well. Other than that, he looked okay.

-Sthandiwe: "Sthandwa sam, how are you feeling?"

He didn't answer. He just looked at Xolisa and:

-Chris: "X, do you mind giving us a moment?"

-Xolisa: "Not at all."

Xolisa walked out, leaving them alone.

-Chris: "I just had a brush with death this evening. If I didn't go down, that bullet would have hit me right in the heart, and I would be dead by now. All because of what? Love? Thandi, loving you has put me in danger not once, not twice but three times. And if I stay with you who knows what might happen next."

She could hear what he was trying to say but her heart just wouldn't accept it.

-Sthandiwe: "So, what are you saying, Chris?"

-Chris: "You love Alizwa, Thandi. You love him more than you love me. Just stop lying to me or to yourself. You even went to see him on Monday even though we had talked about that and you made a promise that you wouldn't see him, that you'd keep your distance. You lied to me, Thandi, you lied. And had it not have been for him blurting it out this evening, I wasn't gonna know that you went to see him. You were gonna continue keeping it a secret. And you'd probably continue seeing him behind my back. So, what does that make me? Your fool, huh?"

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, no. What you're saying is not..."

-Chris: (cutting her off) "I wasn't done talking. And I wasn't asking you anything, I was only telling you. Telling you the truth. The truth that you already know... You are carrying Alizwa's child, Thandi. And that means you two will always be connected. And it won't matter what I do or say, you'll keep seeing each other behind my back because you love each other, and there's nothing I can do about that. I was a fool for believing you when you said you no longer have feelings for him. I guess I believed you and ignored the signs because of the love I have for you. But now it's time I let go. I saw how you looked at him and even talked to him back at your house, Thandi. You were all soft on him even though he was being disrespectful towards me. You kept saying "please", because you didn't wanna hurt his feelings. You rather have my feelings hurt than his. Because you love him, Thandi. So go ahead and be with him after he gets out of prison for shooting me. I'm releasing you, MamTshawe. This, us, can never work. And I'm done forcing it. I don't want that psychotic father of your baby on my back, because the next time he tries to kill me he might succeed. And dying for a woman that doesn't love me enough is just not worth it."

-Sthandiwe: "Wow. I...I don't know what to say. I can't believe you're saying this to someone who just jumped in front of a bullet to protect you. Chris, I literally took a bullet for you this evening. To me, dying for you was gonna be worth it, because I love you. I just didn't know that you thought differently....And tell me, what happened to 'nothing would ever scare me away from you, Thandi?' What happened to that? I know I was wrong by going to see Alizwa and not telling you about it but, Chris, you are also wrong by saying I still want to be with him. I've been saying this over and over again, Chris I am done with Alizwa, and I wanna be with you. I love you. Going to see him on Monday doesn't mean I still wanna be with him. I don't. I told you why I wanted to go. I just didn't know that they were lying about him being in hospital."

-Chris: "I hope you're listening to yourself. You are not mentioning anything about love. You keep saying you don't wanna be with him, you're not saying you don't love him. That's because you do, you love him. So, like I said, I'm releasing you. Don't let me stand in your way. You're free to do whatever you wanna do, Sthandiwe. I'm leaving us behind...I'm sorry."

She could feel tears falling out of her eyes, her heart felt like it was being ripped out of her chest.

-Sthandiwe: (crying) "No, baby, you can't do that me. You can't."

-Chris: "It's already done. I've made my decision and that's it. I'm sorry. From now on just keep your distance from me. Don't even come to visit me here."

-Sthandiwe: (still crying) "Chris, doesn't this ring on my finger mean anything to you? You proposed to me, Christopher. And soon we were gonna stand in front of a pastor in church and share our vows. 'For better or worse.' But now that it is worse you don't wanna stick around? You wanna leave me before we could even tie that knot? What was this marriage gonna be like if you're now bailing out on me on the first challenge we find ourselves facing? What was it gonna be like?"

-Chris: "I'm done talking, Sthandiwe. Now please leave, I want to rest."

He said that turning his head to look the other way. Sthandiwe opened her mouth to say something but no words could come out. A lump just formed in her throat and tears came flooding down her cheeks. She stood there, hard to believe what was happening. Until the doctor came in and told her that she should leave and let the patient rest. She slowly took her engagement ring off and put it on top of Chris' bedside locker. Then walked out, tears still streaming down.

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She met Xolisa just outside the ward, in the corridor. He said something to her but she couldn't hear what he was saying, she just continued down the corridor.

The others were in the waiting area up front. They saw her coming, crying, but she didn't stop once she got to them, she just walked past. She wasn't feeling herself. The ER was busy, there had been a car accident, victims were being rushed in on gurneys but none of that chaos brought her back to earth. She just kept walking like a zombie towards the exit, and her tears wouldn't stop flowing. Her whole world was just thrown into turmoil. The man that she loved, the man she was going to marry, the man that gave her purpose in life, the man that she fought her enemies so she could live a normal and happy life with, the man that gave her some kind of goal and strength to fight that fight was now kicking her out of his life. And it hurt. A lot.

It was just a sad sight as she walked out of that hospital crying and too caught up in her pain to even give a fuck about who was looking at her. She wasn't even noticing that there were people staring. She wasn't seeing or hearing anything. The world was just closing in on her.

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Chris was left in the ward with a broken heart. He was really torn. Letting Sthandiwe go was the hardest thing he ever had to do. But he had to do it, or at least that's what he thought. He took the engagement ring and held it in his hand. He looked up trying to hold back tears but he was losing battle against his emotions. He crumbled, the whole thing crashing through him in tears and trembling. He took the ring to his lips and kissed it. That only opened his flood gates even wider. His tears flowed like a river and he couldn't hold them back. He was losing the woman he was ready to marry. The woman he loved wholeheartedly. But even though it hurt so much he wasn't regretting his decision, he felt that letting her go was the best thing to do before he got any deeper. Before he got hurt even more.

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Outside, Sthandiwe was still crying too. She walked aimlessly, not knowing where she was going, but she just walked, leaving the hospital's exit. It was like she was in a trance, not feeling herself. She snapped out of it when she heard tyres of a car screeching and its horn honking. She realised that she was in the middle of the road, still inside the hospital yard, and the driver of the car, who had just turned a curve, had to do emergency stop. Shit! That was close. She apologised and ran across. The driver of the car just shook his head and drove off. As she stood on the other side, catching her breath, she felt someone touching her shoulder. She turned and it was KG.

-KG: "ST, are you okay? I saw you coming out crying."

-Sthandiwe: "Do I look like someone under the category of okay, KG?"

-KG: "I'm sorry. When we went in, Chris told us that he was breaking off the engagement. I'm sorry. I tried talking to him but he wouldn't hear it."

-Sthandiwe: "I really don't wanna talk about that, KG. Just let me go."

-KG: "Go where? Let me take you home. It's late and you don't have a car. You came in mine, remember?"

-Sthandiwe: "Just go back to your little girlfriend and friends inside and leave me alone, Kagiso. I'll call a cab."

-KG: "Just so you know, I don't like how they treated you back there. I don't agree with what they are doing. I'm with you, gazi, I got your back."

-Sthandiwe: "But it sure didn't seem like it in there."

-KG: "What are you talking about? When Palesa was saying all that shit, blaming you, I stood up for you. And I just told you that I tried talking to Chris too. So what do you mean I don't have your back?"

-Sthandiwe: "What about when Palesa took you and Sihle to see Chris and left me behind? Why didn't you say anything then? Why didn't you stand up for me to your girlfriend? You knew very well that I wanted to see Chris immediately but no, you just kept quiet and went with her. That hurt, KG. It hurt...I thought I could count on you."

-KG: "Of course, you can count on me, ST. I'm sorry about what happened in there. I'm really sorry. And I'm gonna talk to all of them and tell them to cut you some slack. They are your friends, you don't need this from them."

-Sthandiwe: "Just go, KG."

She said that already taking out her phone and requested an uber. KG looked at her and saw that she really didn't want to be around him.

-KG: "I'm really sorry. About your engagement too."

Sthandiwe didn't respond. He decided to walk away. He walked back to the others, who were now standing by the hospital's exit, looking at them at a distance. Sthandiwe just looked the other way, and wiped her tears, while waiting for the uber. She didn't even see them leave.

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As she waited, a call from a number she didn't recognise came through. At first she didn't want to answer it but she ended up answering.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello."

-Caller: "Thandi, it's Minnie. I've been meaning to call and thank you for everything but I just kept being distracted by other things."

Sthandiwe smiled, at least it was something good.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh hey, Minnie. It's okay. How have you been?"

-Minenhle: "I've been okay. Thanks to you. Thanks for getting proof about my rape for my parents. Without it, they wouldn't have believed me. So, thank you so much. Thank you for getting me back home to my family."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad you're okay. But you know how you can thank me?"

-Minenhle: "No. How?"

-Sthandiwe: "You can thank me by getting your life back. Live it the way you wanted to live it before that bastard decided to rape you. Refuse to be a victim. Besides, the bastard is dead now so that should be doable, right? Continue being strong, okay? Can you do that for me?"

-Minenhle: "Of course, of course. You are amazing, Thandi...I'm gonna do that. And Chris suggested I see a therapist. My parents suggested the same thing too. But I don't think I can do it. I don't think I can be able to open up to a stranger. It sounds intrusive."

-Sthandiwe: "I know exactly what you mean. I once felt the same way too about therapy. But once I tried it, my perspective changed. It works, Minnie. So I'll tell you what? Find a therapist there, around Pretoria and book one session with them. If after it you don't feel like continuing then I'll never tell you to go for it again. But if you want to continue, I'll pay for all your sessions till you feel that you're okay."

-Minenhle: "For real? But, Thandi, I can't expect you to do that. You've already done a lot for me. So, it's okay I'll get a therapist but my parents will pay."

Her uber arrived.

-Sthandiwe: "Minnie, I insist. And I gotta go now, my cab's here. When you get a therapist tell me. Okay?"

-Minenhle: "Okay, I will. Thanks."

They hung up. Sthandiwe got in the cab and it took her home. It was now around 22:00.

She got home and went straight to her bedroom then to the en-suite bathroom. She still had Chris' blood on her clothes, arms and face. She had managed to wash only her hands back in the hospital. She went to stand in front of a mirror and looked at herself with all that blood. Tears trickled down her cheeks. She stepped inside the shower with her clothes still on. She turned the water on and sat on the shower floor in a foetal position, crying. The water cascaded down on her and by the time it reached the floor it was red, mixed with all that blood. And she couldn't stop crying. Her sobs were loud and heartbreaking. Thirty minutes ran out with her sitting that way. She eventually got up and got out of the shower. She took the wet clothes off. Dried herself, lotioned then went to bed with a shattered heart.

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In Pretoria. Alizwa walked into the apartment with an angry Mel on his tail.

-Mel: "I mean it, I quit. I didn't sign up for this, Al."

-Alizwa: "Fine, quit. I don't give a fuck. I've got more important things to worry about, Melanie. I don't need this noise."

He said that plopping down on the couch.

-Mel: "You are a crazy jerk, you know that? You asked me to drive you to see the mother of your baby. Why didn't you tell me that you were actually going to shoot her? Why? Because if you did I would have refused... And I've been driving you around in circles for hours since we left Auckland Park. I'm tired, I'm scared, and you're not even apologising. Fuck you. Hear me? Fuck you."

-Alizwa: (voice raised) "Melanie, please! I said I don't need this noise."

Mel walked away, to her bedroom and banged the door behind her. She stripped her clothes off and got to bed. Angry. Exhausted. Yandisa and her husband were still not home, date night. Left alone, Alizwa walked to the bathroom and went straight to the medicine cabinet and took out a 3-quarters full bottle of morphine and a new syringe. It was a morphine Mel got for him when his injuries were still new and a lot painful. He closed the cabinet and walked out of the bathroom. But he bumped into Yandisa as soon as he stepped out, she also wanted to access the bathroom, not knowing that there was someone inside. He tried to hide the morphine but Yandisa had already seen it.

-Alizwa: (nervously) "He-hey, sis. You're only coming in now? Must have been a great date night, huh."

-Yandisa: "It was. What's with the morphine? I thought you don't use it anymore."

-Alizwa: "I uhh...I've hurt myself in the wound in my thigh. And now it hurts like hell. So if I want to sleep, I'm gonna need this morphine."

-Yandisa: "Oh, okay then."

-Alizwa: "Goodnight."

-Yandisa: "Night."

He sauntered off, leaving his sister watching him from behind, not buying his story.

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He got inside his bedroom, sat on the bed and took out his phone. He scrolled through his album until he reached Sthandiwe's photo. He stared at it for a long beat. Then:

-Alizwa: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I shot you. I didn't mean to...But why did you jump in front of that bullet? Why? I wanted to kill Chris only, not you too. But I can see now. I can see that you loved him too much to even take a bullet for him. But why couldn't you love me that way too? Why? I loved you, Thandi, so much. Still do. Why couldn't you love me like I do? Why did you choose Chris over me? Why? Now we can never be together again. And it hurts. It hurts like hell... I can't live like this. I can't. You're gone and I have no reason to live anymore. I don't wanna live without you, thando lwam, 'cause I know I'll be living in pain. Life without you, MamTshawe, is nothing but torture. I gotta do this."

He closed the photo and put the phone aside. Then filled the syringe with morphine. He wanted to overdose on it and kick the bucket once and for all. And he was about to inject himself when the door swung open and Yandisa stormed in.

-Yandisa: "Al, please stop what you're doing. What's going on?"

-Alizwa: "Stop? What's the point of living, Yandisa, if I can't be with the woman I love?"

-Yandisa: "This is about Thandi? No, no, Al. No woman is worth dying for. If she doesn't want to be with you then let her be and live your life. You'll find another woman that's gonna love you wholeheartedly."

-Alizwa: "I don't want another woman, Yandisa, I want Thandi. But that can't happen now, can it? She's dead. Thandi is dead, Yandisa."

He really thought she was dead because he had shot her in the chest and didn't get a chance to see that she was alive.

-Yandisa: (shocked) "What? Thandi's dead? How?"

-Alizwa: "I shot her. I went to her house and pulled the trigger. But that bullet wasn't meant for her, it was meant for that boy, Chris. She just jumped in front of it."

-Yandisa: "Alizwa, Alizwa, what were you thinking?"

-Alizwa: "I wasn't thinking. I wasn't even there to shoot anyone. I just wanted to talk to Thandi, but Chris was there and it happened."

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-Yandisa: "Why were you even carrying a gun, Al?"

-Alizwa: "For protection. Ever since Reneé died I've been jumpy. I know they say she died of heart attack but I know that's bullshit. A healthy person can't just die of heart attack. I think the people she was working for killed her. And they might come for me too. You can never know. So I had to be protected every time I leave the house."

-Yandisa: "So Thandi's dead and now you want to die too? What's wrong with you, Al? What have you turned into? What happened to my brother? I want him back, not this pathetic weakling in front of me."

-Alizwa: "I am still your brother. I just fell in love, that's all."

-Yandisa: "Love? This isn't love, Al. Love isn't this dangerous. You'd swear that this Thandi gave you some love portion or something."

-Alizwa: "I don't know about love portion. What I know is that I loved her and now she's gone, all because of you."

-Yandisa: "Because of me?"

-Alizwa: "Yes, because of you. Yandisa, I was already accepting the fact that Thandi didn't want me, but your lies raised my hopes up. When Thandi came here on Monday after you had lied to her about me being in hospital I was ecstatic because it showed that she still cared about me. I thought there was still a chance that we could work things out and be together again. But when she told me in front of Chris that he chooses him over me, I just lost it."

-Yandisa: "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry for lying to her. It's just that I saw how devastated you were when you came back from her place on Thursday and I wanted to help. I wanted to help you fix things

with her. I wanted her to come here so you could talk things through. And when that minor accident happened I got something to lie about, a reason to get her here...But I now know that it was just a stupid idea. And I'm sorry it hurt you, that wasn't my intention, I just wanted to help."

-Alizwa: "It doesn't matter now. The damage is already done. Now leave my room."

-Yandisa: "So you could kill yourself? Hell no. Al, you still have a life ahead of you. You can't kill yourself over some woman that doesn't even know what she wants. You are going back to work on Monday, you have a life. You can't do this."

-Alizwa: "Going back to work? Yandisa, have you been listening to me? I've shot and killed two people this evening. And that means I'm going to jail, not back to work."

-Yandisa: "Did someone see you?"

-Alizwa: "I don't know. How could I know? Everything happened so fast, Yandi. But I'm sure that the neighbours heard the gunshots. And the gun I used is registered in my name. I'm screwed."

-Yandisa: "We have to get rid of that gun first thing in the morning. Anything else, we'll deal with it when it comes. Okay?"

Alizwa didn't reply, he just stared at her.

-Yandisa: "Now please give me that morphine."

She yanked it off his hands, together with the syringe.

-Yandisa: "I want to see you alive in the morning. Night."

She walked out. Leaving Alizwa drowning in guilt.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe woke up and got ready for work even though she wasn't feeling like going. Before leaving, she went to put the damp, bloodied clothes she was wearing the previous day in the garbage bin in the back yard, then let out a deep sigh. It was going to be a very long day.

And it sure was. Conducting lectures when she got to work was difficult. But she had to do her job. And thank God she didn't bump into Xolisa in those corridors. He wasn't in, and that worked for her, she didn't want to see his face.

Around 13:00 she left her office and drove straight to Pretoria. She got to Yandisa's apartment building and didn't buzz in. Instead, she went straight to the security guard and offered him five R200 notes, bribing him so he could let her up. And he did. Fak' imali uzobona. Money talks.

She got to Yandisa's apartment and knocked on the door. Alizwa went to open. He almost fell back when he saw her, shocked that she was still alive.

-Alizwa: "Thandi, you're alive?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not the dying type. You should ask your dead ex wife."

She said that shoving him inside. He staggered back and she got a chance to quickly get inside and close the door behind. Her shove was quickly followed by a kick and Alizwa fell on his back. She hovered over his body and stepped on his chest with one foot. And he didn't fight her, not because he was scared of her but because he respected her as a woman. Sthandiwe also knew that what she was doing was wrong but she was just too angry and unable to control herself.

-Sthandiwe: "That was for shooting me."

Then she stepped on the shoulder that was injured and pressed her foot down. Alizwa screamed in pain.

-Sthandiwe: "And this is for shooting Chris. Oh and he's also alive by the way."

-Alizwa: "Ouch, Thandi, that just healed."

She removed her foot.

-Sthandiwe: "There's a very thin line between love and hate, Alizwa. I still cared about you but the moment you pulled that trigger I crossed the line to the "hate" side. I despise you, Alizwa. I really do. And I curse the day I met you... Just be glad the new Sthandiwe doesn't kill, otherwise I'd kill you right now. But know this: if you come anywhere near me again, I'll forget the vow I made to myself and put a bullet between your eyes. Got that?"

He could see it in her eyes that she meant it. Her eyes were cold and scary.

She didn't say anything more after that, she just walked to the door and walked out. Leaving Alizwa heartbroken. He could see that she really hated him. And that hurt. Too much. Worse than her being dead. Her words had cut deep and the pain lingered on his face. He got up and sat on the couch, sad. But just then there was a knock at the door. He went to open already talking, thinking it was Sthandiwe again.

-Alizwa: "Back for round two?"

But it was two cops.

-Cop 1: "Alizwa Zakhe?"

-Alizwa: "Yes?"

-Cop 2: "You are under arrest for the attempted murder of Christopher Motaung. You have the right to..."

He couldn't hear anything else they said after that. His worst fear was becoming a reality.

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Sthandiwe got home. As she was pulling up in the driveway, an unmarked detective's car pulled up behind her. The detective she was dealing with from the Brixton Police Station got out of the car. She got out of hers too as he approached it.

-Sthandiwe: "Detective, what can I do for you?"

-Detective: "We forgot to give you your gun back when you were at the station. We concluded the investigation as you know, so you can have your gun back."

He said that handing a brown paper bag to her, with the gun inside.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, thanks, detective."

The detective nodded. Then got back in his car and drove off.

The gun reminded Sthandiwe of the guns she wanted to get rid off.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "I really need to get rid of those guns before I get tempted to use them again."

So without even going inside the house, she got back in her car and drove off to Hyde Park. The keys for the house and the gate were in her car. She got there and went to get the guns out of the safe. She put them all inside a bag, including the suppressors and ammo, then left. She got back home and went to put the bag in the study. Then went downstairs to sit in the front porch with a tub of ice-cream. Apart from the pregnancy cravings, she needed the ice-cream to comfort herself. She was just stressed out, with one thing stuck in her mind - Chris.

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But at the hospital, Chris was telling his parents that she was a past he was willing to forget.

-Mr Motaung: "You did what? You know that your uncles were ready for the lobola negotiations, right? Now you're telling us this?"

-Chris: "Dad, you're talking as if I wanted this. I also didn't want things to end this way, but I had to do it. I had to break off the engagement before I lose my life. And marrying someone who doesn't love me enough would be a recipe for disaster. It would backfire."

-Mrs Motaung: "I'm really disappointed in Thandi, you know. I loved that girl and I was looking forward to her being my daughter-in-law. And now this? But I don't blame you, son. Not at all."

-Mr Motaung: "You don't blame him? Chris, needs to start living in the real world. There are no perfect women here. In fact there is no perfect anything. We just make do with what we get. (he looked at Chris) Thandi was and still is the right woman for you, Junior. You just said it yourself, that loser shot you because she chose you over him. She chose you and she was ready to marry you. Yes, she's made some mistakes but we all do. Don't we? You're not perfect either, Junior. Don't act like you are."

-Mrs Motaung: "Motaung, our son has made his decision. All we can do now is to accept and respect it and not try to convince him to change his mind. He can't continue with the marriage if he's uncertain about Thandi. And raising another man's child is not on. Especially a psychotic man like this one. If my son wants peace in his life, he should stay away from Thandi, period. We do not want to visit him in hospital like this again, or worse bury him."

-Mr Motaung: "My dear, the psychotic man you're talking about is now behind bars. And the woman who took a bullet for your son I'm sure is sitting at home right now shedding tears for him. (looking at Chris) Just talk to her, son. Talk to her and work things out."

-Chris: "Dad, my mind is made up. You're just gonna have to accept that and tell my uncles that there will be no lobola negotiations."

His father lifted his hands up as a sign of giving up. He had really tried.

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Chris' father was right, Sthandiwe was still sitting in that porch crying. Losing Chris was just too painful. But when she saw KG's car pulling up in her driveway, she quickly wiped the tears away and tried to compose herself, not wanting his pity. KG got out of his car and came to her.

-KG: "ST."

-Sthandiwe: (dull) "Kagiso."

-KG: "How are you holding up?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm okay. What are you doing here?"

-KG: "I'm here to check on you. To see if you're okay. I'm coming from work and I thought I should pass by before I go home."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, thanks. But as you can see, I'm fine."

-KG: "You're not fine, ST. You've been crying, I can see it in your eyes. Come on, talk to me. I'm your friend and I got you."

-Sthandiwe: "Talk about what, KG? You already know what's going on and I don't wanna talk about it."

Fresh tears escaped her eyes and she couldn't hold them back. KG pulled her into an embrace without saying a word. He didn't want to lie and tell her that everything was going to be okay. He just wanted to be there for her. She sobbed into his chest for a moment too long, then pulled back.

-Sthandiwe: "My world is upside down, KG. I don't know what to do anymore. The only thing that kept me going is now gone. When I was busy with that crusade, only one thing kept me going - the thought of being with Chris in the end. It kept me focused, KG. Gave me something to look forward to,

a goal. But now that I'm done with all that and ready to focus on him and our engagement, this had to happen. But why? Why, KG?"

She cried again. And KG was only happy to be her shoulder to cry on.

-KG: "I can't tell you why, but I can tell you this: everything happens for a reason."

-Sthandiwe: "And what could possibly be the reason for this?"

-KG: "You may not see it now but you will, eventually."

-Sthandiwe: "It hurts, KG, it hurts. I don't want to be with Alizwa or any other man, I want Chris. Yes, before the shooting a part of me still loved and cared about Alizwa but that didn't mean I wanted to be with him. He is not for me, Chris is."

-KG: "And Chris still refuses to believe that. Love sucks, hey...But tell me, did you know about the shooting before it actually happened? Why were you wearing a Kevlar vest?"

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't. I only wore the vest because I thought Greg's men were following me and I didn't wanna take chances. And when I jumped in front of that bullet I had even forgotten that I was wearing the vest. All I wanted was to protect Chris. I was ready to give up my life to save his. But here we are, he dumped me anyway."

-KG: "I'll talk to him again... But who's Greg?"

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She told him the entire story.

-KG: "Yoh that's hectic. Did Chris know about this?"

-Sthandiwe: "I only told him about it this past weekend when I was with him in Cape Town."

-KG: "You only told him after the fact? Nah, ST, that's not the way to do things. And you almost died in that Greg's house without any of us knowing. What were we going to do if that had happened? What were we going to do? Never ever do something like that again, ST. Hear me? Don't ever do it again. Call me first and I'll always be there to help you. Okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks but there won't be a next time, I'm done with that life now. No more fighting for me, no more guns. And speaking of, you promised to get rid of my hot guns."

-KG: "Yeah, I was here to get them yesterday. But I found you on the floor."

-Sthandiwe: "Then wait here, I'll go get them."

She went inside the house and went to get the bag with the guns from the study. Then went back to KG and handed it to him.

-KG: "I talked to Palesa and the others as I promised but they wouldn't budge. They still blame you for the shooting."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for trying. But it's okay, let them blame me. I now understand where they are coming from. And I won't even hold a grudge against them."

-KG: "I don't get why they are doing this, after everything you've done for them."

-Sthandiwe: "Let them be. They'll see that they are wrong eventually. And when that happens I'll be right here willing to accept their apologies...Some things are better ignored, KG."

-KG: "Just like you did with Gugu. When she found you in my room that morning she called you names and wanted to beat you up but when she landed in hospital you forgot all about that and wanted to help her. You're amazing, ST. And Chris was lucky to have you. But if he doesn't see that then it's his loss."

-Sthandiwe: "I have my strengths, KG. But I also have one major weakness, a fatal flaw - love. Even my enemy, René, saw it and used it to get to me. When it comes to love I become the dumbest human being in existence. I make stupid decisions. See even now, I managed to do everything else but I've failed in one thing - love. I've lost Chris forever....You were right, love sucks. I just hope all this won't affect your relationship with Palesa though...You really love each other, huh?"

-KG: "I believe we do. And we'll make our relationship work."

-Sthandiwe: "Good then. I just hope you are not a rebound, after Siya."

That got to KG, he went quiet, thinking about it, its possibility. Oops! Sthandiwe realised that what she just said was not cool.

-Sthandiwe: "But it can't be that. She really loves you. I know she does."

-KG: "Yah hey. Let me go, I'll see you tomorrow. I'm sure MaKhumalo is waiting for me."

They hugged and he left. Sthandiwe went inside the house, went to get her laptop and booked a flight to East London for the following day, on Friday. It was the weekend she had put aside to go to Grahamstown to find her family for the lobola negotiations. But even though there weren't going to be any negotiations, she didn't cancel the trip. She still wanted to find her family, and she also wanted to get out of Jo'burg for some time. Maybe a change of scenery would do her good, even though it was only going to be for a couple of days.

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The following day she left work at 14:00 and went to catch her flight. She landed in East London, went to get a rental car she had organised and drove to Grahamstown. Her good memory served her well, she remembered where the house she visited at 15 was. She got there, parked outside the gate and got out of the car. The gate was manual and it wasn't locked. So she went to open it then drove inside. It was now around 18:00. When she parked in front of the house, her uncle came out of the

front door. He had heard the car coming in and came to check what was going on. It was the same uncle she contacted when her father died, before she lost his number. Her father and this uncle had the same grandparents, their fathers were actually brothers. And that means BB and him were also brothers, but Whites would say they were cousins.

As soon as he saw her, a wide smile formed on his face.

-The Uncle: "Thandi? Is this you?"

-Sthandiwe: "In the flesh, uncle."

He pulled her into a warm embrace. Something she had been longing for. A hug from her family, not people who'd turn their backs on her when it gets rough. She buried herself into his chest like a child. And he held her tight. What a warm welcome.

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Sthandiwe received a very warm welcome in Grahamstown. Her uncle, Mncedisi, and his wife were elated to see her. They even called other relatives and let them know about her presence, something she never expected. She slept that night feeling warm and relaxed, she was really home.

The next day, on Saturday, the other relatives came for a family get-together, just a small gathering to welcome her. Everyone but her dug in their pockets to buy meat, sausage, chicken, snacks and drinks for the berbecue. It was really fun meeting and interacting with relatives she didn't even know she had. For once, in a long time, she was feeling the love of her family. She felt so connected, so loved and cared for. She even took a step back and watched her loving family as they mingled, laughing, having fun. She found a tear escaping her eye as she was realising what she had been missing out on all those years. As she wiped the tear away she thought to herself, "These people, my family, really do care about me. They really do." And at that moment she didn't need anything or anyone else, her family was enough. The contentment she felt inside was unexplainable. MaKhumalo was right, family is everything. Everyone was so nice and welcoming. And she was really enjoying herself, completely forgotten about the drama she had left in Jo'burg and about all that heartache. Well up until she felt sharp lower abdominal pains. They would come and go. And because she didn't want to spoil the fun she didn't say anything to anyone.

In the evening she said her goodbyes to everyone and left with her cousin, Bongiwe, uncle Mncedisi's 30-year-old only child, who was living and working in Alice as a doctor.

They went to her house in Alice. She was going to spend some time with her before boarding her flight back to Jo'burg the following day. And she also wanted to see the famous Alice - the home of the University of Fort Hare, the university of legends.

When they got to Bongiwe's house, well the house she was renting, it was around 20:00. And thank God, the pains she had been experiencing during the day were now gone.

-Sthandiwe: "So this is THE Alice? I don't wanna lie I expected to see a town a little bigger than this."

-Bongiwe: "It's a small town with a big heart. You should visit more often and you'll see what I mean."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna take you up on that... So what's this neighbourhood called? It seems quiet. My kind of place."

-Bongiwe: "It has no name of its own, it's part of the Alice town. But the neighbouring suburb is called Happy Rest. Then the Victoria Hospital, where I work, is located in the township of KwaNtselamanzi. But I'll show you around tomorrow before you leave. You'll also get to see the University of Fort Hare."

She really looked forward to that. Little did she know that the universe had other plans for her.

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She went to her bedroom still in high spirits. But as soon as she hit the pillow everything came back to her, all that heartache and sorrow she was running from caught up with her. It was about time. But this time around she refused to cry. She distracted herself by brushing her tummy and talking to her unborn baby - the only good thing that came out of her relationship with Alizwa, the only thing that was good in her life at that moment.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, baby. How are you doing in there? I want you to know that mommy loves you so much, okay? It doesn't matter who your father is, I'm gonna love you and take care of you, baby. You are my baby and I'm not gonna abort you. I'm sorry I even considered that... I always wanted a baby. I remember I'd watch Sihle with her son and say 'God, I want that.' Now God has granted me that wish, He gave me you, and I should be grateful. Hell, I AM grateful. I can't wait to meet you, baby. It's gonna be just you and me, and we'll be just fine. Okay?"

She fell asleep with her hand on her tummy. But in the middle of the night she woke up feeling an excruciating pain in her lower abdomen. It was heavier than the pains she experienced during the day and she couldn't keep it to herself. She had to tell Bongiwe about it so she could take her to the hospital before something bad happened to her baby. She turned the bedside lamp on but when she was getting out of bed she could feel that she was wet down there. Her eyes trailed down and she noticed that she was actually bleeding. She felt her chest tighten and panic set in as she let out a deafening scream for Bongiwe, who came in running.

-Sthandiwe: "Bongi, my baby. I can't lose my baby."

That came out from someone who was already freaking out. Bongiwe noticed the blood. It was a lot and she knew that it was bad. But she remained calm, not wanting to make Sthandiwe panick even more.

-Bongiwe: "Okay, just lie still on your back. I'll go get the car."

She rushed out of the house to get the car out of the garage, leaving Sthandiwe doing as she suggested. Then she went back inside and helped her into the car. She drove at a brisk pace to Victoria Hospital. But by the time they got there, Sthandiwe had already passed out. She got tended to immediately, thanks to Bongiwe. But that didn't help. Because when she came to, terrible news was awaiting her.

She opened her eyes and found Bongiwe by her side. Everything came back to her, her baby.

-Sthandiwe: (anxious) "My baby. Bongi, how's my baby?"

-Bongiwe: "Cuz, you're awake."

-Sthandiwe: "Just answer my question, Bongi. Is my baby okay?"

-Bongiwe: "Wait, I'll be right back."

She walked out and came back with a doctor. The doctor gave her the six words that any expectant mother dreads to hear, "I'm sorry, your baby is gone." He said them sympathetically then walked out. The news was too difficult for Sthandiwe to accept.

-Sthandiwe: "Bongi, please tell me this is not true. My baby can't be gone. No. I've already lost too much, I can't lose my baby too. God wouldn't do that to me. No, He wouldn't."

Bongiwe held her hand in hers.

-Bongiwe: "I'm so sorry, cuz. The doctors tried everything they could but it was already too late."

Bongiwe only confirmed what she didn't want to hear. Her baby was really gone. Her only comfort was gone. The chance to pick up her crying baby and be everything that he needs; to hold that warm, soft body and feel the weight of his head resting on her chest was taken away from her. She felt like her heart was being cut into a million pieces. Her hands began to shake. Tears welled up. The room became foggy. Her chest tightened. And she let out a deafening, heartbreaking cry. Bongiwe tried to calm her down but she just kicked her out, wanting to be alone.

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In the morning she wanted to be discharged. Bongiwe tried to convince her to stay for another day, just to relax and recuperate. But she wouldn't hear it.

-Sthandiwe: "Bongiwe, I have a plane to catch. I have a job waiting for me in Jo'burg. I can't stay here."

-Bongiwe: "But your plane is only in the evening. For now just stay here and relax."

-Sthandiwe: "Being here will only force me to think about my baby, Bongi. This place is so fuckin' depressing. Please talk to the doctor for me, they need to let me go. Please."

Tears were now escaping her eyes. Bongiwe decided to do just as she requested. She indeed got discharged and Bongiwe drove her home. When they got home she offered her something to eat but she couldn't stomach anything. She just wanted to be left alone.

When the time came she got ready and Bongiwe drove her to East London in her rental car. She left Alice without even getting the tour she was looking forward to. She only got to see the university as she passed by it on their way down the King William's Town Road. They got to East London and she went to leave the rental car, said her goodbyes to Bongiwe then went to board her flight.

She landed in OR Tambo and went to get her luggage. Then she decided to go grab some coffee before heading home, just to refuel her body. But when she entered Mugg & Bean, she bumped into Chris who was coming out with his coffee. He was there to board his own flight back to Cape Town. He had been discharged from hospital on Saturday, and his left arm was up in a sling.

They both stood there just staring at each other, until Sthandiwe broke the silence.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris."

-Chris: "Hi."

-Sthandiwe: "Can we talk?"

-Chris: "I don't think we have anything to talk about, Sthandiwe. Now if you'd excuse me, I have a plane to catch."

Those words struck her right in the heart. And the way he said them, so coldly, took away any little hope she had of ever reconciling with him. She felt her tears welling up. She blinked several times trying to fight them back, but they trickled down her cheeks anyway. Chris just stood there and watched her with an expressionless face. She didn't know what he was thinking but whatever it was it wasn't good for her, she thought. She yanked the chain that had his pendant around her neck and held it in her hand. Then slowly took his hand and put the pendant in it, as she saw no reason to keep it anymore.

-Sthandiwe: "Goodbye, Chris."

Then she walked away, without even getting that coffee. Chris looked at the pendant then at her walking away. He couldn't deny that he was hurting too but he convinced himself that he couldn't do anything about it, that letting her go was the right thing to do. Even his father and KG had tried to change his mind over the weekend but they both failed. He put the pendant in his pocket and walked away. When the time came, he boarded his flight back to Cape Town, leaving the woman he loved behind.

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As soon as Sthandiwe got home, she went straight upstairs to her bedroom. She dropped her bag on the floor and went to curl up on the bed, feeling hurt and defeated. Seeing Chris that cold towards her hurt so much. He treated her like a complete stranger and not someone he was engaged to just days ago. Tears streamed out of her eyes, wetting her pillow and she let them. Her heart was torn, the pain was just too much. So unbearable. The song Chris had KG write and sing for her on her engagement day kept playing in her head and she couldn't shut it out. She took her phone and looked at the photos that were taken that evening. Chris had sent them to all the members of "The Strong Six." In all of them she looked so happy with her man and her friends, something that was now a forgotten past to everyone in those photos but her. All of that was now gone and she was left alone. It hurt, it hurt so bad. Yes, without a doubt she had gained one beautiful and meaningful thing in her life, her family. But she had also lost three things that she held dear to her heart: the man she loved, the friends she valued and trusted the most and the baby she had come to cherish. She sobbed loudly until she couldn't cry anymore. Tears just dried out. Her whole world was still crushing inside her chest but she had ran out of tears to shed. She sat there in silence, her eyes wide opened, not even blinking. She was just far from everything. Then she decided to just end it all. She decided to die. It was easier to die than to live with so much pain. Hoping that everything would be okay eventually just felt like a waste of time at that point. Getting to see the light at the end of the tunnel seemed like something that would never happen. So there was no point hoping at all.

She climbed down the bed and went to the bathroom. She took a whole bottle of painkillers out of the medicine cabinet and got some water with the tumbler she would use when brushing her teeth. Then she got back to the bedroom, sat on the floor and emptied the pills onto the palm of her hand, ready to swallow them.

She was once her father's brave girl. Her father taught her how to be a survivor. He'd even boastfully tell his friends how strong his girl was. But at that moment she was nowhere near being strong. She was just drowning, suffocating. She was seeing death very closely but as she was about to throw the pills in her mouth she saw her father's face. Obviously he wasn't there, it was just her subconscious mind communicating with her. She knew that he wouldn't want her to take her own life. In fact he'd be disappointed in her. He'd want her to be strong for herself.

She was desperate to die that night but the spirit of her dead father wouldn't let that happen.

-Sthandiwe: (crying) "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, papa."

She got up then in a fit of rage she threw the pills across the room and they scattered all over the floor. She was angry. Angry at herself for being that weak to even consider taking her own life.

-Sthandiwe: "What is happening to me? What the fuck is wrong with me?"

She paced around the house, scratching her head.

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She stopped when her cellphone rang. She hesitated then checked the display, it was Minenhle. She tried to compose herself then answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello."

-Minenhle: "Hey, Thandi. How are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm okay. You?"

-Minenhle: "I'm okay. I went to see the therapist Friday."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh. And how did it go?"

-Minenhle: "It went well, actually. Better than I thought. So much that I think I'm gonna continue seeing her."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good. Then you should send me your bank details, I'll transfer the money for the sessions to you, a lump sum. A promise is a promise, right?"

But Minenhle could hear that she was not okay.

-Minenhle: "Thanks, hey. But are you...okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah...I'm fine."

-Minenhle: "No, Thandi, you're not. I can hear that you've been crying. And Xolisa told me about what happened between you and Chris."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't want to talk about that, Minnie."

Minenhle kept quiet as if searching for something to say. Then:

-Minenhle: "What is the price of your tears?"

Sthandiwe became angry and told her:

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing."

-Minenhle: "Then wipe them off. And never cry again. You're stronger than that, Thandi. You became strong for me even though you didn't know me. You saved me from myself. Now I want you to be strong for yourself. This pain you're feeling right now is not gonna last forever, it's gonna go away. Trust me, I know. Just be strong, okay?"

Even though Sthandiwe was angry at first, she calmed down. She could hear some sense in what Minenhle was saying.

-Sthandiwe: "Thank you. I guess I needed to hear that."

She hung up and went to bed determined to live and be the strong woman BB left behind. She had to stop feeling helpless.

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Sthandiwe woke up the following day determined to make some changes in her life. She made her bed and went to take a shower. Then got dressed and left the house. But instead of driving to work, she went to the cemetery, to her parents' graves. She got there and knelt down on their single tombstone.

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for appearing to me to save my life last night, dad."

She stopped and exhaled.

-Sthandiwe: "After everything I've done, all the blood I've spilled, maybe I deserve everything that's happening to me. But I'm gonna be strong. I'm gonna survive because you taught me to be a survivor. This deep wound in my heart is gonna heal. But in order for me to heal I need to find myself again. That's why I've decided to go away for a while. Away from all this. I'm sure you know where I'm going and I think you'd approve. So yeah...bye, pops. Bye, mom."

Then she got up and left. She drove to campus and went straight to Prof Jansen's office and told him that she was leaving.

-Sthandiwe: "I know I said I was going to leave after the year-end exams but I've changed my mind, I'm leaving now."

-Prof Jansen: "But, Blie, you can't do that. You have to serve your notice. What do you think is gonna happen to your students now? Who's gonna teach them?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't care what happens after I'm gone, I'm going and that's it. The university can sue me if they want to but I quit and no one is going to change my mind."

And with that she walked out and went to her office to pack all her stuff. She took them to her car then passed by the HR department to tell them exactly the same thing she had told Prof Jansen. Then she drove out of the campus, leaving it for good.

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She drove to meet up with her lawyer in some coffee shop in Rosebank. And they got down to business.

-The Lawyer: "So, what can I do for you? You were vague on the phone."

-Sthandiwe: "Ty, I want to liquidate my real estate properties. Everything except for the house I live in. I want to sell the house in Hyde Park and the B&Bs in KZN and Eastern Cape. But I'm going away soon and I'm gonna be away for 3 months so that's where you come in. I need you to take care of all that for me when I'm gone. I'm giving you power of attorney."

-The Lawyer: "Are you sure you want me to do that?"

-Sthandiwe: "I am. You've been my lawyer for years, Ty. And you were my father's lawyer before that. I trust you."

-The Lawyer: "Well in that case I'll draw up the papers. And I'll do as you've requested...So where are you going?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okinawa."

-The Lawyer: "Okinawa the Japanese island?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yep."

-The Lawyer: "What will you be doing there?"

-Sthandiwe: "Soul searching and healing. Plus it's the place I was going to visit with my father before he died."

-The Lawyer: (not seeing this) "Oh, okay."

-Sthandiwe: "I gotta go, I have travel documents to organise. Please draw up those papers and we'll go through them tomorrow."

And with that she got up and left.

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By the end of that afternoon she had done everything she wanted to do that day, including meeting up with the movers. She had packed everything of sentimental value from the Hyde Park house and moved them to her basement in Auckland Park. Everything else was going to be sold along with the house.

After transferring the money to Minenhle for her therapy sessions, she retired in front of the TV debating if she should tell KG about the miscarriage or not. But if she wanted to stop suffocating she had to talk to someone. So she ended up calling him. But she didn't tell him anything over the phone, she just asked him to come over to her house. He sure did and she shared her pain with him. With no hesitation, he became the good friend he had always been to her. Her shoulder to cry on. And having had lost a baby himself, he understood the kind of pain she was going through. And he assured her that he'd always be there for her. They ended up chatting up a storm about other stuff, not wanting to entertain the pain. He left there very late and Sthandiwe was already feeling a little better. Sharing the pain with someone who really cared made it a little bearable. But she didn't want Palesa and the others to know about it, so she asked him not to say anything to any of them. He only gave her a not-so-convincing nod then hugged her and left. He left without even hearing that his best friend had decided to leave the country for a while. But that was deliberate, on Sthandiwe's part. She didn't tell him because she didn't want him to convince her otherwise.

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---A WEEK LATER---

A week had passed and KG being KG took it upon himself to let Palesa, Sihle and Xolisa know about Sthandiwe's miscarriage, even though she had specifically asked him not to. His justification was that Sthandiwe needed all the support she could get at that point. And surprisingly enough, all of them came to the house to show her some support. They put everything behind and became the support system she needed, as friends should. So yeah, even though there wasn't any kissing, she made up with all of them, even with Palesa. But Chris was still distant. They hadn't talked to each other since that airport encounter.

Now it was Saturday and Sthandiwe was going to leave the following day. But still, only she and her lawyer knew about it. Her friends didn't.

She was ready to leave. All her affairs were now in order, except for one thing: she needed to get Christmas gifts for all her friends and family because she wasn't going to be around on Christmas. She had purchased all the gifts from her florist's gift shop and the florist delivered them that day. Well, except for the ones she had gotten for her family members in Eastern Cape. She only purchased those and left the florist with the address to courier them to around Christmas. Then she took the job to deliver the ones for her Jo'burg friends herself, on that day. She started with Xolisa and Minenhle. But Xolisa wasn't home, she only found Minenhle. She was spending the weekend in her brother's house while he was away in Cape Town, visiting Claire. He and Claire were officially an item and they were doing good. At least he had finally found his happiness.

Anyway, Sthandiwe gave the gifts to Minenhle and she accepted them with so much joy. There was something about her, she looked different than the last time Sthandiwe saw her back in Cape Town. She was now happy and full of life. She had been to three sessions with her therapist and things were already looking up. Seeing her that peaceful gave Sthandiwe hope too. She left there hopeful that she too would find inner peace in the end.

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Her next stop was Sihle's house. She had three gifts; for her, her husband and her son. But Sihle was confused as to why she would give them Christmas gifts in October.

-Sthandiwe: "That's because I know that I won't be here in December. I'm leaving tomorrow, Sihle. And I won't be back till January."

-Sihle: "What? Where are you going?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okinawa."

-Sihle: "That far? But why? And why didn't you tell us?"

-Sthandiwe: "I need some time out, Sihle. To think things through. To find myself again. I need to do this for myself. And I didn't tell you all because I knew that you'd stop me."

Even though Sihle was sad about her leaving, she understood why she was doing it.

-Sihle: "I understand. But I won't say I'm not sad or disappointed. Muzi and I will be renewing our vows this December and I wanted all my friends to be there, you included. But now you're telling me this?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, chomi. I didn't know that you guys are gonna be renewing your vows. You didn't tell us."

-Sihle: "I was gonna tell you all this weekend. But now you're leaving. Eish...but it's okay. No harm done."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm really sorry I won't be there. But all the best with the ceremony. I know it's gonna be beautiful. And may God continue to bless your marriage. May you continue being strong together until death do you part. You two are an inspiration to us, the single folk. You give us hope that there is a 'happily ever after' for us all."

-Sihle: "Thanks, chomi. We try...So when's your flight?"

-Sthandiwe: "Tomorrow at 2:25 in the afternoon."

-Sihle: "Well then, all I can say is travel safely. And I hope you find what you're looking for. But I'll be there tomorrow, at the airport to bid you farewell, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. Thanks, chomi. I gotta go now. So Merry Christmas in advance, I guess. And please make sure that y'all don't open the gifts until Christmas."

-Sihle: (laughing) "Don't worry, we won't."

Then she walked her friend out. Sthandiwe left and drove off to Palesa's apartment. She found KG there too. His relationship with Palesa was still on and going strong each day. Even though Sthandiwe had some doubts, thinking that he was just a rebound for Palesa, it didn't seem like it. Their relationship was going well and they were happy together. So basically everyone in what used to be "The Strong Six" was happy and doing great in the love life department except for her and Chris, and that hurt. But she was without a doubt happy for her friends.

When she gave Palesa and KG their gifts and told them about her departure, to say KG was sad would be an understatement, he was hurt. More so because she didn't tell him about it on time. He felt like she didn't trust him enough and that hurt. But he let it go.

-KG: "But why are you leaving, ST?"

-Sthandiwe: "I have to. A lot has happened to me here, KG. And if I want to get over all that and start afresh, I have to go away to clear my head. I need some time off to breathe and heal, in a different environment. And I also need to find my purpose in life again. I know I can't accomplish any of that by staying here. I don't wanna lie, I feel like I'm suffocating here, KG. Everything is just closing in on me."

-KG: "Then I understand. Go and when you come back we'll be here waiting for you. Okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. So to you both, Merry Christmas in advance."

-KG and Palesa: (at the same time) "Ditto."

She hugged them both and left.

As soon as she stepped out the door, Palesa took her phone to make a phone call.

-KG: "And now?"

-Palesa: "I have to tell Chris that Thandi is leaving. He has to stop her. I know he still loves her and he can't let her go away without her knowing that."

-KG: "You're sure he'll stop her? Baby, you know how stubborn your brother is. You know that we talked to him about this but he wouldn't change his mind. So what makes you think he's gonna change it now?"

-Palesa: "The fact that Thandi's leaving the country will change his mind. I mean it has to."

-KG: "I sure hope so."

-Palesa: "There's only one way to find out."

She dialled Chris' number.

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Chris, the known non-drinker, was at a bar with Zach in downtown Cape Town, downing tequillas like crazy, when Palesa's call came through. He let it ring with no intention to answer.

-Zach: "Hey, I think you should answer that. It might be important."

-Chris: (tipsy) "I...I don't care. (to the barman) Another round, please."

-Zach: (to the barman) "No, thanks, bro. We're done. (back to Chris) You need to slow down, hey. And answer the damn phone."

Chris took it out and answered it.

-Chris: "Lisa. Whassup?"

-Palesa: "Chris? Are you drunk?"

-Chris: "How's that any of your business? Why are you calling me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Well, while you're sitting there drowning your sorrows in booze just know that the woman you love is hopping onto a plane tomorrow. She's leaving the country. Now the question is, what are you gonna do about that?"

-Chris: "What? Thandi's leaving?"

-Palesa: "Yes, to Okinawa. Tomorrow at 14:00 hours. And I can't say I blame her. You haven't given her a reason to stay. But you can still change that, bro, you can."

Chris didn't reply to that. He slowly slid the phone down his ear and hung up. The news just threw him off and sobriety set in.

-Zach: (looking at him) "Is everything okay?"

-Chris: "Thandi's leaving the country tomorrow."

-Zach: "And you're gonna let that happen?"

-Chris: "What do you mean?"

-Zach: "Dude, Thandi wasn't planning on leaving the country. And now all of a sudden she's leaving? It's obvious that she's leaving because of your break up. Clearly, it hit her hard. Just like it did you. But if you go to her before she boards that flight and tell her how you really feel, I'm sure she'd see no reason to leave."

-Chris: "Ugh. Come on, Zach."

-Zach: "Buddy, you love that woman, we both know you do. And I know that she loves you too. I mean, I saw how you were around each other when you were at my house the last time. How you looked at each other, with so much love and contentment. And you were happy when you were with her. Now look at you, sitting your ass at a bar, drinking. You're now turning into a drunk, something you never were. But let me tell you this, you can down as many tequillas as you want but you'd still be living in pain. They are not gonna hold you close at night. Only one woman can. And she's leaving tomorrow. So make sure you stop her."

-Chris: "I can't do that, Zach. She loves another man."

-Zach: "I don't know her heart but I'm telling you what I saw in her eyes. That woman loves you, Chris. And she was ready to marry you. Sure that should count for something. And from what you told me about her and this other guy, I think she was telling the truth. That she went to see him only because she still cared about him just as someone she used to be close with. Let's face it, Chris, you'd also do the same for Namhla. I'm talking about the same woman who dumped you for a rich man after you invested so much into your relationship with her. If you could hear that she was in her deathbed you'd drop everything and go see her. Tell me I'm lying."

Chris didn't.

-Zach: "My point exactly. That's because you once cared so much for her. And no matter what she did to you, you just can't stop caring. But that doesn't mean you want her back. You would never take her back no matter how much she begs, I know you wouldn't. But you still care about her. Same goes for Thandi and this other guy. So please cut her some slack. She loves you, buddy."

-Chris: "Ey. I don't know, Zach. I really don't."

-Zach: "I know you think you did a good thing by letting her go. But good for who when you're both hurting? You haven't dodged no bullet by letting her go. You are just losing the love of your life."

Chris didn't say anything, he just downed his last tequilla.

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Back in Jo'burg, Sthandiwe delivered all the gifts she wanted to deliver. Including to MaKhumalo, uncle Mike, uncle Vic and even Sean, her ex. But he didn't find him home, so she left the gift with his father, uncle Vic. She went to bed that night satisfied that she had managed to thank everyone who had played a role in ever making her life an easy one throughout the year. She also wanted to go see Alizwa who was still in jail after refusing bail, to say her goodbyes and tell him about their baby, but she decided against it.

The following day, she woke up, made her bed and made sure that her house, that she was going to leave with KG, was clean. Then got ready. KG, Sihle and Palesa were going to come pick her up and take her to the airport. But before that she had to make one phone call, to Sean. But his phone went straight to voicemail. She decided to leave a message.

-Sthandiwe: "Sean, it's Sthandiwe. I know that by the time you get this message I'll already be out of the country. I just wanted to thank you once again for giving me that Kevlar vest. It literally saved my life. If it wasn't for it I wouldn't be standing here right now leaving you this message. So thank you. Thank you so much. And take care."

With that she hung up and smashed the phone against the kitchen counter. She could just turn it off and leave it as she didn't want to be contactable where she was going, but she just didn't want anything that reminded her of Chris. And that phone was bought for her by him so it had to go. When it was destroyed, she put it in the trash can then ran upstairs. She went to her study, got her laptop and made a money transfer to Chris' bank account. Then sent him an email. "The money is for the dental implant. A promise is a promise." By the time she closed her laptop, the horn from Palesa's car was already honking outside. They had arrived to take her to the airport. So she went downstairs with her luggage and was met by warm hugs from KG, Sihle and Palesa. Xolisa couldn't make it as he was still in Cape Town, he had just made a phone call in the morning, wishing her all the best with her journey of discovery.

They helped her with her suitcases to the car. Then it was goodbye Auckland Park.

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They got to the airport and when it was time to go board her flight, Sthandiwe said her goodbyes to her friends. Goodbyes accompanied with warm, tight hugs. But Palesa's heart couldn't accept that her friend was really leaving. She kept looking around. For Chris. She hoped that he would come and stop Sthandiwe from leaving. But Chris was nowhere to be seen.

-KG: "I really hope this isn't the last time we ever see each other, gazi. Please come back in one piece."

-Sthandiwe: "Of course I'll come back in one piece. I'm not going there to die. I just want some space to put things into perspective. To deal with the pain and the guilt I'm feeling inside. To find inner peace. Then after that I'll come back stronger than I've ever been. And maybe I'll find love again."

-Sihle: "You really do need some time out, chomi. The past couple of months have been a rollercoaster ride for you. A lot has happened to you and you also did a lot. Both good and bad."

-Sthandiwe: "You can say that again, chomi. I did a lot of bad stuff and believe it or not, I am carrying that guilt with me...See this is the thing about me, when I see my life and that of my loved ones under threat, everything else goes out the window. And I'd do whatever it takes to save myself and them. I mean whatever it takes."

-Sihle: "Do you regret any of the things you did?"

-Sthandiwe: "Honestly? No. But that doesn't mean I was right."

-Sihle: "I don't understand."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm neither a judge, a jury nor an executioner, Sihle. I am a citizen of this country and I should have played by its laws. Taking the law into my own hands wasn't right. You see, when you cross the line it always starts off with the small step and before you know it you are running as fast as you can in the wrong direction just to justify why you started in the first place. And that's exactly what happened with me. There are laws that I should have followed to get justice. And those laws were made by more important and smarter people than me and in the end I know that those laws have to be more important than my need to survive and my hunger for vengeance. In my mind I know that. I just don't think my heart could ever have lived with it if those people got away with everything they did to me and my family. And that's why I decided to take it upon myself to make them pay. But I can never say be or don't be like me. The only advice I can give you is, in life try to make choices that you can live with. I made mine."

-Sihle: "I hear you, chomi. But in the end I hope you get God's mercy. I hope you find that inner peace and get rid of all that guilt. Then come back to us."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Me too."

They were talking but Palesa wasn't. She wouldn't stop looking around for her brother who was a no show.

The final announcement that Sthandiwe's flight was boarding came through and she really had to go.

-Sthandiwe: "This is it, guys. I'll see you all next year. Y'all take care of yourselves, okay?"

She hugged them all one last time then hurried off. She turned around one last time and waved to them as they stood exactly where she had just left them, with teary eyes. It sure was a bitter moment for all of them.

Chris arrived running just as Sthandiwe was disappearing in the line. He called out for her but she kept walking not hearing him. He tried to pass through the gate but the security wouldn't let him through without a boarding pass. He stepped back, took his phone out and called her but her phone went straight to voicemail. Hopeless, he went down on his knees in front of all those people and let his

tears fall as he watched the woman he loved disappear, leaving him behind. Leaving without knowing that he was ready to give them another chance again. The whole thing seemed like it was happening in slow motion to him but it wasn't. It was just his foggy eyes. He cried vulnerably, in helplessness and shame. Sthandiwe, the love of his life, was gone. Just like that.

Insert #75

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Sthandiwe went to Patrick's suite, as she had seen it earlier, and knocked on the door.

-Patrick: "Who is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Patrick, it's Thandi. Please open up."

Momentarily, Patrick came to open wearing a bathrobe. He opened but blocked the door with his body.

-Patrick: "Hey. Aren't you supposed to be sleeping? I thought you said you were tired."

-Sthandiwe: "No, I've changed my mind. I'm taking you up on your offer. You offered to take me out, right? So we can go. But that's if you're not busy."

-Patrick: "No, it's cool. I'm still up for it. Come on in then."

He walked deeper into the suite allowing Sthandiwe to follow him inside. She noticed the knap sack he was carrying earlier on the coffee table next to an open laptop.

-Sthandiwe: "So, you came all the way from California with just a knap sack?"

-Patrick: "Huh?"

-Sthandiwe: "I mean when I met you at the airport that's the only thing you were carrying."

-Patrick: "Oh that. No, I wasn't coming from home then. I got here last week. I was just coming from mainland Japan. Osaka."

-Sthandiwe: "Osaka, the food capital of Japan. Are you like a foodie or something?"

She asked that as a joke. He laughed.

-Patrick: "Nah. I was there for something else. (then quickly as if avoiding that subject) By the way, how do you spell 'Blie'?"

But instead of spelling it she:

-Sthandiwe: "It's 'lie' with a 'b' in front. Why do you ask?"

He pointed to the laptop on the coffee table.

-Patrick: "I was just checking you on social media. But I couldn't find you in any of the platforms. I thought I was spelling your last name incorrectly. Or just like me you have another name you use on social media?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'm not on social media. I deactivated all my accounts before coming here. I don't want anything that connects me to my life back home. I believe that's what taking a break means. Why were you checking me out anyway?"

-Patrick: "I like checking out people I interact with. Out of curiosity, you can say."

-Sthandiwe: "You know that it killed the cat, right?"

-Patrick: (laughing) "Well, I'm glad I ain't no cat then. Anyway, let me go get dressed quickly. I'll be with you now-now."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure."

He went to the bedroom. Leaving Sthandiwe taking a seat on the couch.

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Left alone, she noticed a violin on a desk in the corner.

-Sthandiwe: "Nice instrument you have here. You're a violinist?"

-Patrick: (still in the bedroom) "No. It belonged to...to my wife."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, you're married?"

-Patrick: "Was. She...she passed away 3 months ago."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh no. I'm so sorry to hear that. That's still fresh."

-Patrick: "It's okay...So, you're not the only one who came here to deal with pain. I'm also here to deal with that pain the only way I know how."

-Sthandiwe: "Life. But we'll be fine, eventually...And hey, you're stronger than I am, I must say."

-Patrick: "What do you mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "I mean you want to heal from losing your wife yet you carried a piece of her with you across the world. If it were me I wouldn't be able to do that. I would try to avoid anything that'd remind me of her until I'm completely healed."

-Patrick: "As much as I want to heal, I don't want to forget about her."

She let a moment lapse before responding to that.

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I guess that makes sense. I mean she was your wife after all."

As she said that a part of her was feeling kind of jealous. She didn't understand why, but she just did. She got up and walked to the table with the violin just as Patrick was getting out of the bedroom, dressed.

-Sthandiwe: "Can I see it?"

-Patrick: "Sure."

She picked the violin up, checking it out. Impressed, she held it as if about to play it.

-Patrick: "You also play? I mean the way you're holding it."

She chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, not violin. Cello. Well, used to. Not anymore."

-Patrick: "Oh? Why?"

She put the violin back on the table.

-Sthandiwe: "I like music. I used to play, sing and compose. But I always find a reason to turn my back on it. The first time I stopped making it because my mentor, who also happened to be my father, passed away and I just had no strength to continue doing it. I didn't want to be reminded of him. Then not so long ago I got back to it, but just for a short period of time, then I stopped again. Now I don't even wanna hear music, let alone making it."

-Patrick: "I'm sorry to hear about your father. But why don't you wanna hear music?"

-Sthandiwe: "Well, up until 12 days ago I was engaged to be married. But my fiancé broke it off. Which is another reason why I'm here...He...he had a song written and sang for me on the engagement day. Then 12 days ago he decided to just break things off. That song wouldn't leave my head for the whole of last week. I kept hearing it in my head, and I could feel my heart pounding. Like it was pumping out more blood than it was getting in. It just hurt. I'd even find myself crying. Same thing would happen every time I hear any other love song. It'd take me back to the evening of my engagement, to how happy I was. But that happiness didn't last. Here I am now, feeling nothing but pain. So yeah, now I just avoid listening to music. Any music, not just love songs. So basically, he ruined music for me."

She didn't know why she saw a need to tell him all that. But she felt safe around him. Like she could talk to him about anything.

He came to stand before her and put both his hands on her shoulders. Their eyes engaged and they held the look. Then:

-Patrick: "I'm sorry. About your engagement. I don't know what happened and I won't even ask 'cause I'm sure you don't exactly want to talk about it right now. But it's like you said, we'll be okay eventually...And what I can say is that, the best way to deal with pain is to face it head on, not to avoid it."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. But that's easier said than done."

She quickly felt uncomfortable with his hands on her.

-Sthandiwe: "Anyway, enough about this sad stuff. Let's get out of here."

Patrick didn't object. He removed his hands from her and they headed out.

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As it was already just before 20:00 in Okinawa, back home it was just before 13:00. And Chris was in his office in the middle of a counselling session with a patient, young woman with a large sticky plaster on the cheek. Getting out of bed in the morning was difficult for him but he had managed to drag himself out and made it to work.

-The Young Woman: "...I've been lying all this time. He didn't stab me in the face, he only pushed me and I fell on the tip of a spear that decorates his lounge. He loves me, he wouldn't hurt me on purpose. And I love him too but I just can't stop myself from cheating on him. I keep cheating on him and he would find out and confront me about it. I'd apologise and he'd forgive me because he loves me. But this time when he found out that I was cheating again, we had a heated argument and he pushed me. I fell and when he saw the blood he regretted pushing me immediately. And he's been apologising ever since...He's a good guy. He's always been good to me. He has a good heart and he takes care of me. But I always hurt him with my cheating. I don't even understand why."

All this time Chris was quiet, just looking at her. She stopped and waited for him to say something. But what came out of his mouth, she didn't expect.

-Chris: "Get out."

-The Young Woman: "What?"

-Chris: "I said leave."

-The Young Woman: "But my 30-minutes is not up yet. I still have about 10 minutes left."

-Chris: (pissed) "Lady, I'm not gonna sit here and listen to your bullshit. You're so fuckin' selfish, you know that? You're only satisfying your sick needs by cheating, you never stop to think about how much you're hurting him. But lemme tell you this, one day he'll get tired of your bullshit and give up. He won't even argue with your ass, he'll just walk away. And when that happens you'll realise just

how selfish you have been all this time. You'll regret taking him for granted. And you'll start seeing his value clearly. But the sad thing is that it'd be too late by then...Now get out of my office and go fix your life before you lose that man for good. You know what you have to do."

The woman just got up and rushed to the door. She was just shocked by her therapist's behaviour. I mean what kind of a therapist talks like that to his patients?

Chris was just losing his professionalism. He wasn't exactly mad at the woman, the person he was mad at was himself. The poor woman just became a surrogate. He was mad at himself for letting a good partner go. For letting Sthandiwe go and only realising after he had pushed her away just how much he needed her in his life. Mad at himself for being selfish. For thinking only about himself, not considering how Sthandiwe felt when he decided to rip her heart apart by dropping her after he had proposed to her.

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When the woman left, he tried to pull himself together. Then he took his briefcase and walked out of his office to her assistant's desk. He just had to leave his office before he could cause more damage.

The desk that used to be Penny's was now occupied by a dark, natural beauty, Naledi, mid 20s.

-Naledi: "Going out for lunch, Mr Motaung?"

-Chris: "No, I'm going home. Please cancel the rest of my today's appointments."

She could see that he wasn't okay, so she didn't ask any questions.

-Naledi: "Consider that done, sir. But before you go. There's a message that came in for you during your last session."

She said that handing him a message slip. As she handed it to him, he noticed her bracelet. A bracelet with an infinity symbol. And he was immediately taken back to what Sthandiwe once said to him. He could hear it in his head as if she was saying it right at that moment. He could see her.

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MEMORY

Sthandiwe got a pen from the dresser, took his hand and used the pen to draw an infinity symbol on it, then a matching symbol on top of it [the double infinity symbols that he ended up inking on his back.]

-Sthandiwe: "Infinity times infinity. That's how much I love you."

-Chris: (smiling) "That's a very long time."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. So you're not gonna be rid of me any time soon, Mister."

-Chris: "Then I'm a lucky guy."

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He snapped back from that when the message slip fell off his hand and to the floor. Everything ar every corner seemed to be reminding him of Sthandiwe and that hurt.

-Naledi: "Are you okay, sir?"

-Chris: "I don't feel so lucky right now."

-Naledi: (confused) "Excuse me, sir?"

-Chris: "Forget it."

He picked up the message slip and noticed that the message was from Zach, asking him to go see him in his office during lunch. Zach's optometry office was in the same Med Centre where his office was. So he went to see him.

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He met him at the door, going out.

-Zach: "Just the person I wanted to see. I was going to your office right now."

-Chris: "We're leaving messages with my assistant now? What's so urgent?"

-Zach: "You haven't been taking my calls since yesterday...How are you holding up? Claire tells me that Sthandiwe left yesterday. She heard it from Xolisa. But, buddy, I thought you were going to stop her."

-Chris: "I was. But my flight got delayed and I got to Jo'burg late when she was already boarding. I couldn't do anything."

-Zach: "Oh boy...So what are you gonna do now?"

-Chris: "What do you mean? Zach, I can't do anything but wait for her to come back."

-Zach: "Chris, you love this woman. And you want her in your life. Right?"

-Chris: "Of course."

-Zach: "Then don't wait for her to come back. It might be too late then. I suggest you go find her, buddy."

-Chris: "That thought did cross my mind. But where am I gonna find her there? Okinawa may be a group of small islands but there's probably a couple million people there. So how am I gonna find one person?"

-Zach: "We'll find a way. I'll also see what I can do. It shouldn't be extremely difficult to find a tourist."

-Chris: "Thanks. I guess."

-Zach: "But for now let's go grab something to eat."

-Chris: "Sorry. Can't. I'm going home already. I just need some air and some alone time to think things through."

-Zach: "That's okay. Talk later then?"

-Chris: "Sure. Later."

He walked away.

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He really needed some air. Ocean breeze was more like it. So he drove straight to his favourite beach, Llandudno beach.

He took his shoes off, rolled his pants and walked along the beach, aimless. One foot in front of another. Staring out at nothing, the endless sea. Waves crashing. Wind howling. Seagulls screeching. Everything closing in on him. He stumbled over a rock and grabbed his head in his hands. Guilty, ashamed, fucked. He had screwed up big time by pushing Sthandiwe away. A wave exploded nearby, drenching him in sea spray. He raked his hand across his face, blinking, eyes stinging from lack of sleep. He tried to focus, to think things through. Then he looked at the place he and Sthandiwe sat the other day, on the sand. He could see her. He could hear her voice "Or maybe we can take a holiday this coming December, just the two of us...Hawaii it is then."

He shook his head and looked at his watch. He knew that he had to deal with the problem at hand. He had to find a way to get to his woman.

-Chris: (to himself) "We are still going to Hawaii in December, baby. I'm gonna get to you and bring you home."

He walked back to his car and drove home.

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As he was that stressed, thinking about Sthandiwe, she wasn't thinking about him at all. He was the last thing on her mind. She was just enjoying herself, mingling with all types of people but especially those who are into martial arts at the Dojo Cafe Bar. There were locals and a lot of foreigners there, from around the world. Everyone was friendly. And they could speak English. So communication was not a problem.

And the owner, James, was even more friendlier and welcoming. So was his staff. And their pizza was out of this world. But it wasn't just about the food or the physical ambiance, it was about the entire place. She felt at home. She didn't expect to receive such a warm welcome in a foreign country but

she got it. She felt like everyone in there was her sister and brother. The sign on the wall of the bar that said "Once we meet, we are a family" was really true.

She and Patrick left there and headed back to the hotel around around 00:30 only 30 minutes before the bar closed. And neither of them was drunk. They just enjoyed the food and the company. She went to bed happy. She didn't even think about any of the things she had lost. She was just enjoying her new life.

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Back at home, Chris sat in his home office that late afternoon, stumped. He had made calls to Sihle, Palesa, KG and Xolisa trying to find out where exactly in Okanawa did Sthandiwe say she was going. But neither of them knew, they never asked. Wanting to narrow down the places she could possibly be, he even asked them what exactly did she say she wanted to do there, and they all said the same thing: that she just said she wanted some time out to heal and find inner peace, and that they didn't ask more. That didn't help him at all. He sat there, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about what to do next.

Then he took his phone and called her phone, even though he knew that it was off. Leaving her those messages, even though he knew she wasn't hearing them, made him feel a little better somehow.

-Chris: (into phone) "Sthandwa sam, it's me again. I'm sitting here feeling helpless, not knowing what to do. The walls of my apartment feel so cold and empty without you. Nothing makes sense in my life now that you're not here. Nothing matters anymore. Where are you, sthandwa sam? Where are you? I need you. I miss you. I've been calling you, leaving countless messages. Call me crazy 'cause that's exactly what I am without you: a crazy, useless man. I don't wanna be without you, sthandwa sam. I want you here with me. I'm missing you, MamTshawe. And I'm gonna do anything and everything to get to you. I'm coming to Okinawa. I don't know where I'll find you there but I'm coming anyway. And I'm gonna get you home. I don't want to forget about you, I don't want you to forget about me either. I don't want our memories to turn to dust. Please, sthandwa sam, don't bury us. If I lose you, I lose myself. Please, give me a sign. Where can I find you?"

He hung up, tears already trickling down his face. As he wiped them, an idea popped in his head. An idea about finding out where the love of his life could be. He picked his phone up again and dialled another number.

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The person Chris was calling was KG. And he answered on the third ring.

-KG: "My man."

-Chris: "KG, you said Thandi left you with the house, right?"

-KG: "Correct."

-Chris: "And you said she left her laptop?"

-KG: "Yep and her phone too. Found it in the bin, smashed into pieces."

As disturbing as that was, Chris couldn't dwell on it. He was only interested in the laptop.

-Chris: "Look, I'm gonna be there tomorrow. I need access to the laptop. Thandi has to have made a hotel reservation online when she was still here. So if we can get into the laptop we can find that information in there. The hotel she's staying in."

-KG: "You have a point. So I'll be expecting you tomorrow."

-Chris: "Sure. See you then."

He hung up and dialled Xolisa's number. Xolisa answered almost immediately.

-Xolisa: "A second call in one day? You must really like me."

He said that joking. And Chris, even though he was stressed, he answered in the same manner.

-Chris: "You sure are a looker, X, but sorry, I'm into women. One woman, actually. And I'm only calling you because I wanna find her. Think your IT guy that helped us locate her when she was abducted can help crack her laptop's password?"

-Xolisa: "Why do you wanna crack it?"

-Chris: "I think I can find the information about the hotel she's staying in on that laptop. So can your guy help me or what?"

-Xolisa: "The guy's one of the best. So yeah, I think he can do it. But at a price this time around."

-Chris: "Money is not a problem. Just put me on his schedule tomorrow."

-Xolisa: "You got it, buddy."

-Chris: "Thanks. See you tomorrow then."

He hung and had to make one more phone call, to Zach. Zach answered already talking.

-Zach: "Hey, I've made a few phone calls trying to find a person who can help us track Thandi down, but with no luck. No one's willing to take the assignment. Not Okinawa."

-Chris: "It's cool, I'll do it myself."

-Zach: "But if you need help you'll shout, right?"

-Chris: "Actually that's why I called. I need your help."

-Zach: "What can I do?"

-Chris: "Getting a tourists visa would take at least 4 working days. And that's time I don't have. Your father has connections in the Japanese embassy. So could you please ask him to pull some strings and get things sped up for me?"

-Zach: "I'll talk to him."

-Chris: "Thanks. Keep me uprised."

He hung up, determined to go get his woman. He went to bed that night with a little hope. But at the back of his head he knew that even if he finds her she could reject him. After humiliating her the way he did, breaking off the engagement, that was to be expected.

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In the morning, Sthandiwe got woken up by the doorbell. She bolted upright and checked her watch.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit! I've overslept."

It was just before 08:00 and she had to report at the Makishi dojo at 9:00.

She quickly climbed down the bed and went to open the door, thinking it was housekeeping. But at the door she found Patrick.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh gosh...Patrick?"

She self-consciously pulled her pyjama shorts down.

-Patrick: "Morning to you too. You were still sleeping?"

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you can't blame me. We came back very late last night...Come on in."

She was feeling uncomfortable being seen by him in those revealing summer pyjamas. So she quickly rushed back to the bedroom and put on a robe then went back to him.

-Patrick: "We have to be at the dojo in an hour. So you better get ready. Quick, quick."

-Sthandiwe: "And I still have to go sort out my car rental issue with the hotel before we go. I want to drive myself there, I don't want to take a cab."

-Patrick: "I never rented a car when here, you know. I always take Monorail or a taxi."

-Sthandiwe: "And why's that?"

-Patrick: "Guess I have a problem with driving on the left side of the road. It just seems weird to me. I don't think I can get used to it."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, I'm from a country that drives on the left so I'm sorted."

-Patrick: "Yeah, be sorted by getting your ass in the shower before we get late."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "Yes, sir."

She left him there and went to hit the shower. She had to make it snappy, time was not on her side. And she didn't want to give a wrong impression to her Sensei by being late on the very first day. Discipline and respect are everything in karate. She got done pretty quickly and got dressed. She packed her karate gi and other essentials in her gym bag then grabbed her passport and went back to Patrick. They left the suite and she went to get her rental car. That was a quick process, so they managed to get to the dojo just in time.

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She got welcomed into a real Okinawan dojo. And it was like a home. Every member in there treated each other like family. The sensei was like a father, the sempai were like older brothers and the regular students were like young kids. And they all treated each other with such respect. That was a new concept to her because she had never been to an Okinawan dojo before, or any proper dojo for that matter.

The training commenced and she was enjoying it. She was inquisitive. Asking a lot of questions from the sensei and other dojo members because she wanted to learn as much as she could. The sensei and some members could speak good English but there were those who couldn't. And Sthandiwe didn't know any Japanese, she only knew a few words. And that was quickly becoming a problem because she couldn't understand what they were saying. But that's when Patrick came to the rescue. He could speak Japanese very well, so he would translate for her, making things a little easy. And she could tell that he was enjoying being of help to her, playing some kind of a hero.

They trained for 6 hours flat. And by the time the session was over, she was dog tired but she was happy because it had been a fruitful day. The sensei, Tetsuo Makishi himself, called her to the side afterwards and they had their first casual talk. About her father and other stuff. And he also apologised for not sending someone to get her from the airport as he had promised. He was a kind man and without a doubt, Sthandiwe was going to enjoy training with him. In fact, it was an honour. He wanted to take her to his home, to meet his family but he had to take a raincheck, Sthandiwe had other plans with Patrick. Patrick had offered to show her around Okinawa, to take her to all the must-see places.

So she left with him. They drove back to the hotel to freshen up properly and have a change of clothes. Then they hit the road. But after a long day it had been, the only place Sthandiwe wanted to be was the beach. So Patrick gave her directions to Nishihara Kira Kira Beach, since she was the one driving.

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He said it was beautiful and he wasn't lying. The beach was very relaxing and scenic. They got there around 17:00 and there were still a lot of people there, especially in the rest area. They were playing soccer and other leisure activities. Which wasn't something Sthandiwe was interested in. All she wanted to do was swim. She immediately took off her clothes, revealing her bikini underneath, then ran into the cobalt blue ocean. She was no longer feeling uncomfortable being half naked in front of Patrick. It was a different situation after all.

Patrick stood at the shore watching her in the water. Mesmerised. Then he quickly followed suit. He removed his T-shirt and was left with his boardshorts. He ran into the water and caught up to her. They swam together hands entwined. And when it came to swimming, they were both in the fish league.

Anyone watching them would think they were a couple, a new couple at that, still in their honeymoon phase. Because they would stop swimming and play in the water, chasing each other. Patrick would lift her up and they would gaze into each others eyes before wrestling in the water again. They were just enjoying the water as if they were teenagers again. You couldn't tell that they had only met the previous day or that they didn't even know much about each other.

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They finally got out of the water and went to sit on the sand, side by side, catching their breaths. They watched the beautiful sunset. It was like a dream, Sthandiwe was definitely relaxed and happy.

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for bringing me here and for being my translator today."

-Patrick: "Don't thank me. You'll be my driver and I'll be your tour guide and translator. So I'd like to think we're even."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, if you put it that way then..."

She trailed off, her ghosts from back home catching up to her. Her whole demeanour changed in just a second.

-Patrick: "You okay?"

She took a moment then answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, yeah...I'm fine. It's just that I just remembered that the last time I was sitting like this on a beach was with my ex-fiancé."

-Patrick: "Still miss him?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'd be lying if I said I don't."

-Patrick: "I know what you mean. I also miss my deceased wife. There's not an hour that goes by without me thinking about her."

-Sthandiwe: "How did she...how did she pass away?"

-Patrick: "She was murdered. Shot dead right on our doorstep."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, no."

-Patrick: "Trust me you'd want to save your 'oh no' for the next part. She was pregnant when she died. So I didn't just lose her but I lost my unborn daughter as well."

-Sthandiwe: "My gosh, that's terrible. I'm so sorry...I also lost my unborn baby just 10 days ago. So I know how it feels like."

Patrick held her hand and looked into her eyes. They held the look.

-Patrick: "You know what I see when I look into your eyes? I see someone who's been hurt...a lot. Just like me. I see a lot of pain. But I also see someone I can totally trust. I don't know, but it feels like I've known you forever. I feel like I can talk to you about anything. And I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything too. We both could use a friend. Right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Right."

That feeling of discomfort was creeping up on her again. And she slowly took her hand off of Patrick's. He could see her discomfort so he decided to change the subject.

-Patrick: "So what does the ink on your back mean."

Sthandiwe just chuckled.

-Patrick: "C'mon, you can tell me."

-Sthandiwe: "The butterfly means transformation. Leaving my old life behind and starting a new one. And the '7' is the number of people I wanted to take with me into my new life. My ex-fiancé, Chris; my ride or die, KG; my friends, Sihle, Palesa and Xolisa; KG's mother who I have a mother-daughter relationship with; and Minnie, Xolisa's little sister who I have come to be fond of. But hey, I got to learn that we don't always get what we want in life. Chris dropped me. He decided that he didn't want to be a part of my life anymore. And I almost lost my friends too. So yeah, that '7' has no meaning anymore."

-Patrick: "I appreciate that you're opening up to me...And hey, don't despair. That's life. In life you lose some and you also gain some. You have me now."

-Sthandiwe: "I do?"

-Patrick: "You do. In this foreign land, I'll be the friend you need."

-Sthandiwe: "I like the sound of that...But now let's get going. It's getting late. I need to get enough rest."

They got up and went back to their car and drove back to the hotel.

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Back in Jo'burg, Chris landed in OR Tambo at 15:15. He had gone to the Office of Consul of Japan to submit his visa application in person in the morning and also had a few things to take care of at his office. It was a Tuesday but he made sure that Naledi cancelled all his appointments for that week and the following week. Because he didn't know how long his trip to Okinawa would take.

He landed and took a cab straight to KG's workplace in Randburg to fetch Sthandiwe's house keys. Then he went to UJ to meet up with Xolisa and they rode together to meet up with the computer wiz. He knew that he couldn't crack Sthandiwe's laptop password on his own. He had tried guessing it before, when they were still dating, but he failed.

They found the IT guy and Xolisa introduced them then left, rushing back to the office. Chris and the guy went to Sthandiwe's house. And they didn't waste any time, they went straight to the study, where the laptop was and the guy started doing his magic. It took him about 30 minutes to crack the password and they were in. Chris' face lit up. But it immediately dropped when they couldn't find what he was looking for. There was nothing about Sthandiwe's trip to Okinawa in there, not even a trace.

He was disappointed. And that disappointment quickly gave way to anger. He grabbed the laptop and smashed it on the desk.

-The IT Guy: "What the hell are you doing? I believe this laptop wasn't yours. So why break it? What are you gonna say to the owner?"

-Chris: "I'm going to have to find her first before I say anything to her. And that's exactly what's making me angry, I don't know how I'm going to find her. This was my only hope."

He started pacing, scratching his head frantically, trying to think.

-Chris: "There has to be something here. Something I can use."

He pulled documents off the shelves. Looking for something, anything that could point him in the right direction. He ransacked the entire study but he couldn't find anything. He sat down on the floor. Tired. Frustrated. Angry.

The IT guy was still sitting at the desk, looking at him. His job was done but leaving Chris in that state just didn't feel right. So he decided to stick around until he calmed down.

Chris sat there trying to focus, trying to think. Eventually, it hit him.

-Chris: "I think there's one person who can help find Thandi."

-The IT Guy: "Yeah? Who is it?"

-Chris: "Just get out. I need to lock up."

The guy got up and made his way to the door, shaking his head. But at least he was done babysitting a grown man. Chris followed him downstairs. He grabbed Sthandiwe's car keys in the lounge then went to open the garage and got the car out. Not the one that once belonged to her mother but her new car, her insurance had finally paid out in the past week - before she left.

He got in the car and drove off.

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If you do something bad you have to be punished. You have to pay for your bad deeds. That's what Alizwa believed when he refused bail.

He sat on a bunk in his cell, which he shared with a handfull other inmates, reflecting on his life - the choices he had made. He was still in the holding cell at the police station, he had not been transfered yet. It was only his second week behind those bars but he was already looking worse for wear. The jail life was really taking a toll on him.

He jumped when a cop came to open the bars calling his name.

-The Cop: "Zakhe, you have a visitor."

-Alizwa: "Me? A visitor? Who is it? I thought I made it clear that I don't want my sister to come see me here."

-The Cop: "Stop asking questions and move your ass."

He got up and followed the cop to go see this visitor. On the way he wondered who it could be. But who he saw in that room when he stepped in was someone he didn't expect to see. Someone who didn't even cross his mind.

Insert #77

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Alizwa couldn't believe his eyes when he saw who his visitor was, Chris himself. He didn't know what he was playing at by visiting him but whatever the purpose of his visit was he didn't like it. He approached him already with an attitude. A sarcastic grin plastered across his face.

-Alizwa: (sarcastically) "Christopher Motaung Junior, the man who put me in here has now come to see me. Wow! What a nice surprise."

But that grin left his face as soon as he sat down across from him at the table. His eyes became cold as ice.

-Alizwa: "What the fuck do you want?"

Chris could see the hate in his eyes. He didn't answer his question. He kept quiet, suddenly feeling unsure about talking to him. This jackass didn't seem like he'd want to help him. But he decided to try his luck anyway.

-Chris: "I need your help."

Alizwa chuckled.

-Alizwa: "What? Did I hear that correctly? You need what?"

-Chris: "I said I need your help."

Alizwa chuckled again, thinking it's a joke. But it wasn't. And when he realised that he stopped chuckling.

-Alizwa: "You aren't kidding, are you?"

-Chris: "No. Look I know that it sounds weird coming from me but trust me, I wouldn't be here if I had any other choice."

-Alizwa: "No, wait. Let me get this straight. You put me here and now you want my help? Are you fucking kidding me? What makes you think I'd wanna help you? Huh?"

-Chris: "Because this isn't about me...or you. It's like you said in that warehouse in Booyens, when it comes to Thandi we have to put our differences aside and work together."

The mentioning of Thandi's name caught his attention.

-Alizwa: "Thandi? What happened to Thandi? Is she in trouble?"

He asked already losing it. Anxious. He still cared about her, in fact he never stopped.

-Chris: "I don't know if she's in trouble or not. She left the country. She went to Okinawa without telling anyone where exactly she'd be staying there. So that's why I'm here, I want to know where she might have went. Where exactly in Okinawa? I want to get to her and bring her back home."

By the time Chris finished talking, Alizwa had already calmed down.

-Alizwa: "Then you made me panick for no reason. Thandi left on her own free will so that means wherever she is she's fine. She isn't in any kind of trouble. In fact, way I see it, the only thing that's in trouble here is your relationship. She left you. She finally admitted the truth, she doesn't love you. It's like I told you, there'll never be a wedding."

-Chris: "Actually, that's not how it happened. I'm the one who broke off the engagement. Because I couldn't be with her knowing that she was carrying your baby. But now that the baby is gone..."

Alizwa couldn't wait for him to finish. He interrupted.

-Alizwa: "What did you just say? The baby is gone? What happened? Did Thandi abort my baby?"

-Chris: "No. She miscarried. Then she left. Now do you know where she could be? She needs to come back home and get the support she needs from the people who love her."

But Alizwa was no longer listening. Hurt that his baby was gone. He put his head on the table and let his tears fall. He really wanted that baby to live. He had lost his son before and now 3 years later he was losing another 'little him'. That hurt. So bad. And he couldn't hide it. He couldn't hold the tears back. Chris let him be.

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Finally, he lifted his head and wiped the tears off.

-Alizwa: "So what makes you think I know where she could be?"

-Chris: "Because you and your dead wife made it your mission to know everything about her and her father, the man that killed your son, before you inserted yourself in her life, wanting to get your hands on her inheritance. So if you knew everything about BB that means you also know about the trips he used to take to Okinawa. Wherever he used to go on that island I think that's where Thandi is. She and her father were very close, as you know. And now that she's down and hurt, with no one on her side, I'd like to think she wanted to feel closer to her father by going where he used to go. Doing what he liked to do. I mean if not, then why did she choose to go to Okinawa out of all the holiday destinations in the world? And since Ted and your wife are no longer alive, you're the only who knows."

Alizwa took a moment then:

-Alizwa: "I know where BB used to go for his Karate training in Okinawa. But if I tell you I wouldn't be helping Thandi I'd be helping you. And it'd be a cold day in hell before I do that."

-Chris: "What if I also offer you something you really want right now? Freedom. I'm willing to change my statement with the police and make sure that those charges are dropped."

-Alizwa: "You must be really desperate, huh. But I'm sorry I'm gonna have to turn your offer down. I'm actually glad Thandi is away from you. And I don't need no freedom, that's why I didn't want bail. I did the crime so now I have to do the time. THAT...is what I want. Because even though I didn't plan to shoot you on that day, I was planning to shoot you on another day. I was planning to go to Cape Town, track your ass down and put a bullet right through your heart for taking Thandi away from me. You just save me the trip by being at Thandi's house that evening. Now listen, boy, take that freedom you're talking about and shove it up your ass. I don't need it. And don't ever show your face up here again."

And with that he got up and made his way to the door, the cop escorted him out back to his cell. And Chris had to leave too. He left disappointed. But he wasn't going to give up. He was going to get to Sthandiwe no matter what.

He went to his car, well Sthandiwe's, got in and drove back to her place.

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He got there and found Palesa and KG sitting in the front porch, waiting for him. He parked the car in the driveway and went to them.

-Palesa: "Bro, you look like hell. Did you find what you were looking for?"

-KG: "That look on your face says no."

-Chris: "Yah, I didn't find any clue. But I'm going to Okinawa anyway. If it means searching every hotel there to find her then that's exactly what I'm gonna do. I got to find her."

-Palesa: "So when are you leaving?"

-Chris: "Friday. I submitted my visa application today and I'm gonna get it on Thursday. Courtesy of Zach's father, the former diplomat."

-KG: "That's good. Go find your woman, pal. And make sure that this time you don't let her go."

-Chris: "That's the plan."

-Palesa: "Did you let our parents know? That you're leaving?"

-Chris: "I'm gonna tell them tonight. I'm going home now-now, I just came to leave Thandi's house keys."

-Palesa: "Yeah, do that. But we'll stick around here."

-Chris: "By sticking around you mean you'll sleep here. Just make sure you don't do the nasty on our bed, okay? Just because Thandi and I aren't gonna be here to supervise you, kids, doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. Okay?"

KG and Palesa laughed. He laughed too.

-Chris: "Hey, I mean it."

-Palesa: "He said 'our bed.' Did you hear that, baby?"

-KG: "It's a good sign. He and Thandi are one. (to Chris) I really hope you find her, bro."

Palesa: "Yeah, me too."

-Chris: "Me three."

They all laughed and Chris said his goodbyes and went back to Thandi's car. He got in and drove home.

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The next morning, Sthandiwe woke up on time. She went to take a shower and got ready to go. Patrick came to get her and together they went to have breakfast downstairs at the hotel's dining room. They enjoyed their breakfast over some funny and interesting conversations, getting to know each other more. Then they went to get in her car and she drove them to the dojo.

It got to be another interesting day at the dojo. And she noticed that in there she connected more with her inner self, something she really wanted. And she also felt connected with her father's spirit. She was definitely on the right path, path to find herself again.

After the exhausting yet fulfilling session, she and Patrick left. It was around 15:30, and they went back to the hotel to get ready for her tour around Naha City. Patrick took her to a few must-see places and she was amazed at how beautiful the city was and how rich it was in culture. It was only her third day in Okinawa but she was already feeling at home. And she was at peace. Out of all the few countries she had ever visited she had never met friendlier people than the Okinawans. And most of them could speak English. And with those who couldn't, Patrick would be her translator. They made a good team and she was feeling safe around him. And just like he had confessed to her the day before, she felt the same way too about him, she felt like she had known him for years. But she had no feelings for him, she was only seeing a good friend in him. In the few days that they had gotten to know each other they had already formed a special bond, the kind of bond that she shared with KG. At first she wasn't sure if that's how Patrick also viewed their relationship, as purely platonic, and that was making her feel a little uncomfortable. But as they moved around the city they got to talk about that. She saw the need to let him know exactly how she felt before they got too close and before he could possibly read too much into their friendship. But when she raised the subject, Patrick just smiled and told her that the feeling was mutual. That he was also seeing her as a good friend and nothing more. And he added that he was still grieving for his wife, and starting a new relationship was the last thing on his mind. HUUUU! That was a relief for Sthandiwe because she was really fond of him and she didn't want their friendship to get complicated.

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Their last stop for the day was the Makishi Public Market. It was busy and had many great fast food shops.

-Patrick: "Okay, this market is also known as Naha's kitchen. You'll find the most delicious food here. But I just want you to try the pork belly."

-Sthandiwe: "What?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, the pork belly. It's integral to Okinawan cooking. I don't know how y'all do things in South Africa but trust me, it's nothing you've ever tasted before. And I'm sure you'll love it."

-Sthandiwe: "I never had that even back home. But I'll sure try it."

So they walked into one of the outlets, ordered it then sat down.

-Sthandiwe: "It's good to go around the world, to see and experience other cultures."

-Patrick: "That's why I like travelling so much. Have you ever been to the US?"

-Sthandiwe: "Only once. And for just a week. On my 21st birthday my dad took me to New York. And that was just about it."

-Patrick: "You should visit California some day. You have a friend there now. Yours truly. Me."

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe I will, hey. You said Sacramento, right?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, that's where I grew up. But I was born in a small town in Texas then we moved to Sacramento when I was 9. Then for my high school I moved to Eureka then LA for college. And now I'm based in Santa Cruz but my parents still live in Sacramento."

Just then their order arrived. A scrumptious-loo

king pork belly. Patrick thanked the waitress in Japanese. Then they dug in.

-Sthandiwe: "You haven't told me how you got to learn to speak Japanese."

-Patrick: "Well, after UCLA I went to University of Tokyo to study Japanese. It was just an interest. An interest that turned out well for me because that's where I met my wife."

-Sthandiwe: "So your wife was Japanese?"

-Patrick: "Yeah. We met at the university and it was love at first sight. And two years later we got married and moved to California...We were so happy, she was my best friend. But now she...she's gone."

He looked down and went quiet. Looking deeply hurt. Sthandiwe didn't know what to say.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm really sorry that she had to be taken away from you the way she did. But even though she was taken too soon I believe you two got to spend the best years together. And that's not something that can be taken away from you by anyone. Those memories will stay with you forever."

Patrick just nodded then:

-Patrick: "How long did it take you to get over your parents death?"

-Sthandiwe: "Honestly? I'm still not over it. Even when I got to avenge their death, I didn't feel any better. I just felt empty."

-Patrick: "Trust me, I know exactly what you mean. They say grief occurs in 5 stages. And that the final stage is acceptance. But for me grief is something that will forever be a part of me. I will never accept. I couldn't accept or forgive even when the men that were behind her death lay dead at my feet."

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "What are you saying? You murdered her killers."

-Patrick: "Tee, revenge is the only language I understand. The only kind of justice I know...Those motherfuckers were after me. So why didn't they just shoot me? Why did they have to shoot my wife? She was innocent. She didn't deserve to die but they did."

Sthandiwe kept quiet, just staring at him. Realising how similar they actually were. Finally, she spoke.

-Sthandiwe: "So, why...why were they after you?"

-Patrick: "That's a story for another day. Let's just finish up here and get going. It's getting late."

They finished eating. And Patrick was right, the pork belly was delicious. They left and drove back to the hotel.

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When she got back in her suite, Sthandiwe went to take a shower getting ready for bed. As the shower water cascaded down on her all she could think about was Patrick. Why did they have so much in common? Was that just coincidence? And why did he have people after him?

But her train of thoughts got derailed by a completely different thought that just crept up on her and threw her off. A realisation of something that just came crushing down on her like a ton of bricks. She had just remembered what her doctor, Doctor Mashinini, told her. That taking some NSAIDs during early pregnancy can lead to miscarriage. She didn't know what caused her miscarriage but she just blamed herself.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh my God, I killed my baby. I killed it."

In a fit of rage and self hate she punched the shower wall, taking her anger out on it. She kept punching it and punching it until she couldn't anymore. She slowly slid down the wall and sat down on the floor. Her hand was now bleeding, severely. And tears were flooding down her cheeks, mixing with the water.

-Sthandiwe: "I took so many lives and I ended up taking my own baby's. Oh, God...what did I do? Please forgive me. Please."

She sat like that sobbing loudly for what felt like eternity. Eventually, she stood up and let the water run down her face as if washing away her sins. She just couldn't forgive herself for continuing taking those fucking NSAIDs even when Chris advised her to stop. She wished she had listened.

She finally stepped out of the shower and dried herself. She lotioned and put on a robe. And by now, she was feeling the pain in her hand. She had fucked it up pretty bad and it hurt like hell. She went to get her first aid kit, got a bandage out and bandaged the hand. Then she went to sit on the bed, knees up to her chin, rocking herself. She just couldn't stop beating herself up inside, blaming herself. Suddenly she felt like talking to Chris. She thought of calling him even though she knew that he'd probably hang up on her.

Insert #78

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Sthandiwe quickly climbed down the bed, put on her sleepers and walked out to Patrick's suite. She really wanted to talk to Chris. But she had no cell phone and she couldn't use the phone in her hotel room because that would result in extraordinarily high charges. So she decided to go ask Patrick to lend her his cell phone and she would reimburse him for the airtime used.

She got to his suite and knocked. He took a while to come open.

-Patrick: "Hey, sorry I was already in bed. And I thought you were too. Something wrong?"

She shook her head no, and stepped inside.

-Sthandiwe: "Can I use your phone? Please."

-Patrick: "Who do you want to call?"

-Sthandiwe: "I want to call home. I want to talk to Chris."

-Patrick: "You sure you wanna do that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah...And I'll reimburse your airtime."

-Patrick: "Forget the airtime. Are you sure you want to contact your ex-fiancé? Think that's a good idea? Didn't you say the guy made it perfectly clear that he don't wanna talk to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I know, Rick. I know that he'll probably hang up on me but I just wanna try. I really wanna talk to him."

That's how she called Patrick, instead of the obvious "Pat".

-Patrick: "And what exactly do you wanna talk to him about? Tee, you do not wanna seem desperate to this guy. Trust me, that's not very attractive."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna beg him to take me back if that's what you think. I'm not even going to talk about our relationship. I wanna talk to him about something else."

-Patrick: "Fine then. You can use my phone."

He gave it to her and she dialled Chris' number. It just rang and rang unanswered.

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It was still around 13:30 back home but Chris was home, in Melrose, sleeping. He had passed out on the couch in the living room after taking some strong painkillers for his left arm. When he came back to Jo'burg, he had taken the sling off and used the arm and it proved to be too soon, it was now giving him hell. But it could have been worse had Sthandiwe's car, that he drove, been a manual.

His cellphone was vibrating on another couch and he couldn't hear it. He was deep in his sleep.

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Sthandiwe dialled again, and it rang until it reached the voicemail lite service. She dialled for the third time, and still the same thing. Chris was fast asleep.

She hung up and gave the phone back to Patrick.

-Patrick: "He's not picking up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah."

-Patrick: "It's okay. You can try him again some other time."

-Sthandiwe: "No, maybe you were right. I shouldn't have called him to begin with. But thanks for letting me use your phone. Goodnight."

And with that she made for the door.

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But before she stepped out, Patrick had to ask.

-Patrick: "Hey, what happened to your hand?"

Sthandiwe stopped and turned around. She went to sit down and told him what happened and why it had happened.

-Patrick: "Tee, no...You can't blame yourself for that miscarriage. Miscarriages can be caused by a number of things. You don't know what caused yours. Your doctor said NSAIDs taken in early pregnancy increase the risk of miscarriage, but she didn't say it was a definite thing that would happen to you. You don't know if those NSAIDs are the ones that caused your miscarriage, Tee. You don't. So why beat yourself about it? Why beat yourself about something you're not sure of? What if they weren't the cause? Then you would be blaming yourself for nothing. And that's not healthy. Seriously. Stop blaming yourself for something you had no control over."

-Sthandiwe: "I guess you're right. Besides, I can't change anything now. It happened and I can't do anything about it. Blaming myself won't change anything."

-Patrick: "Exactly."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for the talk, hey. I needed that."

-Patrick: "Anytime...Tee, you came here to forget about your past. To overcome guilt and pain. And find inner peace. But you won't accomplish any of that if you keep going back to the past...But I can't really fault you for thinking about what happened. You can't really shut thoughts out of your mind when they knock, but you can control how you deal with them when they creep up on you. Listen, when you find yourself trapped in your dark past again, instead of hurting yourself just come to me,

okay? Come talk to me. Anytime, day or night. And you already know that you can talk to me about anything, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Right...Look, Rick, even though I just met you I already see you as a good friend. Someone I can trust and talk to about anything... You know, my dad used to say, 'In life there comes a time when one must trust others, and that's not a bad thing as long as one chooses carefully who to trust.' With that said, I am choosing to trust you, Rick. And to me trust means everything. I'm letting you into my world, trusting that you won't betray me. Trusting that your intentions are pure. But if they are not, then..."

She stopped and looked straight into his eyes, not blinking.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't see this as a threat but it's just something I have to say. If you have an agenda I will get to find out at some point and my reaction won't be very pleasant...The last guy that betrayed my trust is now in jail, but I didn't put him there. When I found out about his betrayal I didn't do anything but break things off with him. I didn't take any other action against him. You know why? Because a part of me still cared about him. Because I was once in love with him. But with you it'd be a different case because I'm not sleeping with you and I never will."

Patrick kept quiet for a moment. That talk came as a shock to him.

-Patrick: "Wow. I didn't expect this kind of talk. But I understand where you're coming from. You've been betrayed before and now you are cautious. But you don't have to be, not with me. Tee, I'm NOT your ex. What did you say his name was again?..Al. I'm not him. With me what you see is what you get. I've always played open cards with you from day one. See, I didn't have to tell you all the things I told you about myself but I did. Because I also trust you...Fuck! Now things are gonna be awkward between us."

-Sthandiwe: "They don't have to be. I just had to tell you this. And I'm glad we got it out of the way. Now we can continue being the friends that we are. Nothing has to be awkward. We're cool."

-Patrick: "Great then...Anyway, are you gonna be okay alone tonight? You won't have another episode?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'll be fine, don't worry...Again, thanks for the talk. Now lemme leave you to sleep. And hey, I won't join you tomorrow at the dojo. Not with this hand."

-Patrick: "Let me see it."

She removed the bandage and showed it to him.

-Patrick: "Damn, with this you probably won't be able to join me for a week."

-Sthandiwe: "Tough. But I'll be fine. See you tomorrow after the training then."

And with that she left. She got to her room, got to bed and tried to sleep. But she couldn't stop thinking about Chris. And not getting hold of him on the phone really knocked her heart down to her feet. She found her lips trembling under those covers but she refused to cry. She was going to be okay. She was going to forget about Chris eventually. And life would go on.

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When Chris finally got up, he saw the missed calls on his phone. He could see that whoever the caller was they were desperate to talk to him because they had called three times. However, he couldn't call back because it was a private number. Patrick's phone had a hidden caller ID and Sthandiwe wasn't even aware of that when she made those calls.

Chris' heart hoped to God that it was her and that she would call again. But even if it wasn't her or even if she didn't call again that didn't really matter to him, nothing was going to stop him from getting to her.

It was Wednesday and he was only left with just a day before he could get on that plane to find her. He used to hear those cheesy love songs talking about crossing oceans for the one you love but he had never thought he would find himself doing exactly that. But now he was only a day away from doing it. He didn't know where or how he was going to find her. But where there's a will there's always a way. He was determined to go look for the love of his life and nothing and no one was going to discourage, prevent or stop him from doing it, not even the bitter Alizwa.

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Time flew and Friday arrived. Chris had his visa and flight ticket, ready to leave. He was excited at the possibility of being reunited with the woman he loved but he was also nervous at the same time, because he didn't know what was waiting for him on that island, how he was going to find her or even if she would be willing to accept him. And his mother's opinion about the whole thing was not helping at all. She wasn't supporting him, in fact she plainly called the whole thing stupid. But his father on the other hand was supporting the act fully and that encouraged him. He was leaving with his father's blessings and that was more than enough for him.

His flight was at 17:10 and Palesa and KG drove him to the airport. They found Xolisa already waiting for them there. He was going to pick up Claire who was going to land a little later from Cape Town, but he just had to be early to see Chris off. Sihle couldn't come because she was still at work. Her new job at the newspaper was pretty demanding.

-Xolisa: "Goodluck, bro. I hope you find her."

-Chris: "You and me both."

-Palesa: "But to be honest, you wouldn't be needing luck if you had listened to me and came here as soon as possible when I told you that Thandi was leaving."

-KG: "No, it wouldn't even have gotten that far if he had listened to me and his father when we were trying to reason with him. Hell, he wouldn't be here at all if he didn't overreact and break things off with Thandi to begin with."

-Xolisa: "When that shooting happened we all overreacted and blamed Thandi, which was wrong. But the good thing is that we realised our mistake and apologised to her. That's the difference between us and you, Chris. No offense, buddy, but you're here because of your pride. You couldn't swallow it and go apologise to her just like we did. You're only acting now that things have spiralled out of control."

-KG: "Please don't get us wrong, we're only reminding you of how you got here. Hoping that, that would help you take this mission of yours even more seriously and not come back here without Thandi. Maybe this will encourage you to not give up, to search for her until you find her. Thandi is a good woman and she loves you, man. I respect you, I really do, but you were a fool for doing what you did to her. That woman literally took a bullet for you. And when I found you two on the floor, I wanted her to go to the hospital as well, to be checked out. But all she wanted to go there for was you. You're the only person she wanted to make sure was okay. She didn't care about herself. And on the way, she was busy putting pressure on your wound with her own T-shirt so you wouldn't lose a lot of blood. She was saving you, man. And when we got to the hospital, I insisted that she be checked out but she wouldn't have that. She left the doctor in that room because she didn't want to just sit there being checked out while not knowing what was going on with you. Again putting you first before her own well-being. And when she went to see you after the surgery, she had blood all over - your blood, Chris. Because she had been trying to save you. But you didn't see all of that. All you saw before you was a woman who just had you shot. Not the woman who, out of love for you, just did all of the things I just mentioned. Her heart was already broken from seeing you shot. But you just had to crush it into even more finer pieces by breaking up with her that night. She was not just your girlfriend, Chris, she was your fiancée. But that didn't mean anything to you. You hurt and humiliated her. After everything she did, showing how much she loved and cared for you. And when we tried to talk to you, you just dismissed us. You didn't wanna listen. And now here you are. I hope this becomes a lesson to you. If and when you get back together, I hope you'll respect and value her more."

Chris nodded, letting everything sink.

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-Palesa: "And my whining didn't help either. I encouraged you to drop her, bro. I did. But I wish I didn't. Thandi wasn't responsible for Alizwa's actions. And her going to see him meant just one thing - that she was still the same caring Thandi that we all know and love. Thandi has a caring heart, that's who she is and she can't change that. I'm sure she didn't even think about how you were gonna react if you found out that she went to see him, all she wanted was to be there for him. Because that's who Thandi is, when someone she knows is having a problem she starts by doing everything she can to help them and think about the consequences that may arise from that later... I remember in varsity, there was this guy I was seeing, Siphos. The same guy that Thandi ended up shooting on that farm in Kroonstad. He was very abusive, he used to beat me. And when Thandi found out, she went to warn him to stay away from me. But he didn't listen. He beat me up again and broke my arm. That's when Thandi lost it. She went straight to the lecture hall he was attending in just as the lecture was ending. And she did to him what he had done to me - she kicked his ass and broke his arm right there in front of the lecture room. She didn't think about the campus disciplinary committee, all she wanted was to

protect me. And she faced the dire consequences later. Because that's the kind of person she is. But when you got shot I forgot all about that. I took the "blood is thicker than water" saying too far. I didn't think about the good friend she has always been to me. I pressed for you to drop her. And I was wrong, very wrong."

-Xolisa: "I hope you don't take any offense from what any of us just said, buddy. We're only trying to show you the way."

-Chris: "No offense given and none taken. You're all just telling me the truth. I was a fool for breaking up with Thandi, that I know. And that's why I'm doing this now. That's why I'm going to find her. I just hope I'm not too late. I pray to God I'm not. I don't wanna lose her. These past two weeks without her in my life were hell. I don't want them to turn to two months or two years and more. I want her back here with me...You know, Palesa, you're right. Thandi is very caring and protective by nature and that's nothing she or anyone can change. And when she hears that someone is in trouble or is facing a problem, she just jumps in to help, not thinking about the consequences. I should have understood why she went to see Alizwa. I should have believed her reason when she told me...I remember the night we went to save Minnie. When we got there, the gate was locked and she wanted to jump over it. I was concerned about being seen as trespassers in someone's property and get into trouble but Thandi didn't care about any of that. She just jumped over that gate and rushed to the house. Y'all should have seen how she kicked that door open. She wasn't thinking about what the owner of the house would say, all she wanted was to get to Minnie and save her life. Anything else, she was going to deal with it later. That's the kind of person she is. She didn't even know Minnie that well then but that didn't stop her from wanting to save her. That didn't matter to her, all she knew was that she was a human being that needed help. And that's exactly what happened with Alizwa as well. I don't think she cared who he was or what he had done, all she wanted was to be there for him, to support him in his time of need. She just didn't know that she was being manipulated. I should have believed her when she told me that. I should have believed her."

-KG: "That's what she did for Gugu, the mother of my baby, too. When they first met, Gugu became mean to her but when she heard that she was in hospital all she wanted to do was help her. She didn't care that she once wanted to beat her up...But hey, Chris, what matters now is that you're doing the right thing. When you get to her you'll admit that you were wrong and apologise to her. And I'm sure that's all she's hoping for wherever she is right now. You'll both be fine in the end, you'll find your way into each other's arms again."

-Chris: "I really hope to God she forgives me, man."

-KG: "I trust that she will. She loves you."

Just then, an announcement that his flight was boarding came through.

-Xolisa: "I believe that's you, buddy. Safe travels."

He said his goodbyes to all of them and sauntered off.

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He landed in Naha airport after 21:00 on Saturday and he took a cab straight to the hotel he had made a reservation in. He went to bed that night hopeful, at least he was now on the same island as Sthandiwe, unlike being oceans apart.

In the morning he woke up early and got ready to go out. He decided to start looking in every hotel within 5km radius from the airport. If she was in Naha City, he thought chances were she was in one of those hotels. And she certainly was.

It was a Sunday and under normal circumstances she would be at the dojo but she hadn't been going for training ever since she injured her hand on Wednesday. She would just wake up early and go for a jog before joining Patrick for breakfast in the hotel's restaurant. Then Patrick would go to the dojo and she would just stick around the hotel, doing this and that, and wait for him to come back at 15:00 and together they would go out. Just explore the city, then when the Dojo Bar opens at 19:00 they would go hang out there with other karate enthusiasts until midnight. And that was something that seemed to be a tradition among karateka in Naha City. After a long day of training they would go hang out at the Dojo Bar and just relax and enjoy the beer, the food and the good company.

So that day was no different for Sthandiwe. She just stuck around the hotel and waited for Patrick to come back so they would go out and do the same thing they had been doing for the past few days.

She wasn't aware that Chris was around, searching for her.

He went to a number of hotels, showing them a printout of her photo but with no luck. And he finally got to the Doubletree by Hilton Hotel - the one she was staying in. But his luck still didn't change. The receptionist wouldn't give him what he wanted. She wouldn't tell him if the person on that photo was staying with them or not. She told him that it was the hotel's policy. That they couldn't give out that kind of information, they had to protect their customers. He left there a bit disappointed. But he wasn't going to give up, he was still going to continue with his search in other hotels.

As he was making for the exit, Sthandiwe got out of the elevator in the lobby, going to the market just to kill time until Patrick comes back. She spotted him. She could only see his back but she recognised it as his.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Chris? Here? What is he doing here?"

She called out for him. But Chris couldn't hear her, he continued to the exit and got out. She ran after him but when she exited to the street she couldn't see him. Her eyes moved around but there was no sign of him. She ended up thinking it was only a fantasy, that she just wanted him to be there.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris was never here. Why would he be here? Nah, I was just seeing things."

She didn't even go to ask the receptionist about him, she just dismissed the thought and proceeded with her walk to the market.

Dangerous Love

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Sthandiwe spent some time at the market doing nothing but walk around. She just walked around aimlessly, with one thing stuck on her mind - Chris. She had succeeded in convincing herself that he was not on the island, that she was just seeing things. But still she couldn't stop thinking about him. In fact, she missed him a little extra. One of the reasons why she came to the island was to forget about him. But so far she was failing to. However, going back home was not an option. She even hated herself for calling him the other day. He was the one who broke things off after all. So no matter how much she missed him, no matter how much it hurt, there was no way she would go back home and try to talk to him. She couldn't forget the look on his face the day they bumped into each other at Mugg & Bean at the airport. How cold his eyes were. How he spoke to her. It was then that she found herself cussing out loud and hitting her forehead.

-Sthandiwe: "Fuck. Shit. Shit. Shit. Why the fuck am I thinking about him? The guy hates me. He doesn't even wanna talk to me. He's probably moving on with his life as we speak, completely forgotten about me. Come on, Sthandiwe, you're so fucking pathetic."

She checked her wristwatch and realised that it was 15:30 and Patrick must be back at the hotel probably looking for her. So she rushed off back to the hotel.

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She got there and went straight to Patrick's suite. She knocked but he didn't answer. She tried the door and it wasn't locked. She got inside and saw him lying on the couch with his eyes closed and earphones on. She smiled as she sneaked up to him and took the earphones off. As she did that, he sprung off the couch, startled.

-Patrick: "Shit, Tee, what the fuck?"

His breathing pattern changed instantly. It became fast and ragged. He was really freaked out. Sthandiwe suddenly felt bad about sneaking up on him.

-Sthandiwe: "Rick, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I've been knocking but you weren't answering. So I let myself in."

He tried to calm himself down and sat on the couch.

-Patrick: "It's okay. But don't ever do it again. PLEASE!"

-Sthandiwe: "I won't. I promise."

She could sense that he was hiding something. Something that was making him jumpy.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you okay? Do you wanna talk about it maybe?"

-Patrick: "No."

His answer was that short, preventing Sthandiwe from asking any further questions.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'll respect that. Anyway, what were you listening to? Let me hear."

-Patrick: "Last I checked you didn't listen to music."

-Sthandiwe: "I know, but I wanna listen to it now."

She put the earphones on and Drake's "Hotline Bling" was on. She smiled instantly.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, my...this is KG's favourite song."

But she quickly took the earphones off.

-Patrick: "From the way you smiled upon hearing the song I'm sure you miss him. Would you like to call him maybe?"

-Sthandiwe: "I do miss him and my other friends. But I ain't calling any of them. I left that life behind for a reason. And I don't want them to remind me of it. If I call them, I won't make any progress here."

-Patrick: "I understand perfectly."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not even sure if they are my real friends anymore, you know. I always thought I could trust them. I thought they'll always have my back. I thought they were loyal to me. But I got to learn that their loyalty isn't consistent. It fades under pressure. They weren't willing to stand by me when things went bad. They just judged me. What kind of friends are they? I know that they apologised and we all made up but I can never trust them the way I used to."

-Patrick: "So what are you saying?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm saying I'm even considering extending my stay here. I like this place. It feels like home already. I want to apply at the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University. And if they accept me I will change my visa status."

-Patrick: "Are you sure about that?"

-Sthandiwe: "I am. My friend, Cole, did it. I'm not talking about studying abroad, he just packed his bags and left SA with his girlfriend to New Zealand, running away from their own drama. I wanna do the same. I've had it with my drama back home."

-Patrick: "You wanna apply for a PhD program? But you already have a PhD."

-Sthandiwe: "Who said I can't do another? At OIST they offer the highest level of graduate education. If they accept me I'll get to work with world-class researchers in a world-class faculty. Doing me, a research scientist. I've got nothing to go back to in SA."

-Patrick: "I feel you. And if it's what you really want then I say go for it. I can even lend you my laptop, you're gonna need it."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, buddy. But for now let's do something fun."

-Patrick: "Something fun like what? Like playing Scrabble?"

-Sthandiwe: "What? Oh, hell no. You just wanna kick my butt. Duh, English is your language, you have a better vocabulary than mine."

-Patrick: "Says a doctor. I'm not one. I'm just a fucked up lawyer."

-Sthandiwe: "Me being a doctor means nothing in this game. I'm not a Doctor of English."

He laughed.

-Patrick: "Let me just get the board and we'll see who's the best."

He got up and went to get it.

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They played until late and Sthandiwe was winning, well obviously Patrick was letting her win. Either way, she was having fun, and the thoughts about Chris had now left her head. After 20:00 they decided to go out to the Dojo Bar. As they exited the hotel they could hear some commotion up the street and they saw a group of people. They rushed to see what was going on. It was a pedestrian hit by a car. A teenage girl just lying there, bleeding profusely.

-Patrick: "See why I don't wanna drive here? Driving on the left side of the road would make me cause accidents like this."

But Sthandiwe wasn't listening to him. She was just staring at all that blood, almost hypnotised.

-Patrick: "Thandie!"

She snapped out of it.

-Sthandiwe: "Huh? You were saying?"

-Patrick: "Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. It's just that the last time I saw a lot of blood on the ground like this was on the floor of my house. It was Ethan's blood, a guy I shot in my bedroom. And I just mopped it off like it was dog's blood. I didn't feel anything. No emotion. Nothing. What kind of human being does that make me?"

-Patrick: "Hey, stop doing this to yourself. What did I say about being stuck in the past. You are only going to drive yourself insane, Tee."

She suddenly didn't feel like going out anymore. She just wanted to go to his hotel room, curl up on her bed and entertain the stress. Maybe that's what she deserved, being consumed by guilt.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't feel like going out anymore, Rick. I'm going back to the hotel. But you can go ahead and go to the bar."

With that she turned around and walked back to the hotel. Patrick hesitated then followed her.

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She got to her room and threw herself on the couch. Guilt about all the people she killed was definitely eating away at her. After a moment, Patrick came in. He went to sit next to her on the couch and spoke softly.

-Patrick: "Hey, here's a thought. Go get into the front seat of your car downstairs, then turn your body around. Knees on the front seat with your back on the steering wheel, your face looking toward the trunk. Stay in that position and try to drive the car forward. It would be impossible, right? If by some giant miracle you do manage to go forward I guarantee you won't get very far. So, if the car represents our lives then the way we are sitting in the driver's seat represents the way we approach it. It's really hard to move on when you're looking the wrong way. There is nothing wrong with the car, what is wrong is the position some of us are sitting in, meaning there is nothing wrong with your life, problem is you're just facing the wrong direction. There are many things that can cause one to be out of alignment with life, but instead of focusing on the many, I'd like to talk about one thing that is causing YOU to be out of alignment with YOUR life. And that's guilt. You feel guilty over the mistakes you've made in your past. You are carrying so much guilt about everything. But I want you to stop that, Tee. See, what I know about guilt is this: guilt is a tool that is used to destroy you. Tee, we all make mistakes. We all have done things we are not proud of. We have all disappointed someone, including ourselves at some point. Unfortunately, there is nothing you can do about it. It's done. Instead of beating yourself up about it, how about putting that same energy into making sure that it doesn't happen again? You can't let guilt win or consume you, Tee. You can't let it take over your thoughts because if you do, you will start a downward spiral. It's like this... guilt is the trick that makes you feel that you're unworthy, and if you feel that you're unworthy then you will feel that you don't deserve any good thing to happen to you. And so, as a man thinks so is he. If you think you don't deserve good things you will never have good things. And when things are falling apart you will feel guilty that they are falling apart. Do you see the cycle? There is no winning here. So, in order to be free and be lifted you must let go of the guilt or it will keep you bound. How do you do that? Well, it's a process, but you can start by asking forgiveness of God, and most of all ask forgiveness of yourself. Although God forgives us most easily, we sometimes can't forgive ourselves. But, Tee, you need to forgive yourself. You can't get to great things ahead if you're always looking behind you. It's like trying to drive your car in that awkward position. You'll always be stuck in your past and your life won't go forward. But you got to stop, Tee. You need to look forward. You need to move on."

Sthandiwe was listening attentively all this time. When he stopped talking, she sat up straight and stared at him. Finally, she let out a smile.

-Sthandiwe: "What, you're a motivational speaker or something?"

He chuckled.

-Patrick: "I'm not. I'm just good at giving out advices I, myself, don't use."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Yeah, no kidding."

-Patrick: "I'm all about 'do as I say' not 'do as I do'. You get it?"

-Sthandiwe: "I sure do. You're crazy. But hey, on a serious note, thanks. Thanks for the talk...the advice."

-Patrick: "You remember I said I'm going to Osaka tomorrow morning, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

-Patrick: "I can see that you're aren't coping. I can see that you're struggling with guilt. So why don't you come with me to Osaka tomorrow and I'll show you how I deal with my own guilt. Don't ask any questions now, just come with me and see for yourself."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah?"

-Patrick: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: "Well then, I'm in. I'll come with you."

-Patrick: "Good. We'll leave early in the morning."

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On the other side, Chris tried to find her in most of the hotels but with no luck. His final stop for the day was the Dojo Bar. Once he saw it and heard what kind of bar it was, he knew that it was a place Sthandiwe would visit. He walked in and asked the patrons and the staff about her, showing them her picture. But they were all not willing to give him the information he needed. Some just told him to wait for the owner, James, and ask him. He took that. He sat down and ordered some food as he waited. Hoping to God that he gives him something.

James came in just after 22:00. And Chris went to him. He greeted and introduced himself. Then showed him Sthandiwe's picture.

-Chris: "I'm looking for her. Her name's Thandi."

-James: "Oh, Tee the South African. I know her."

-Chris: "Tee?"

-James: "Yeah, that's what we call her around here. She's a regular here. What is she to you?"

-Chris: "She's my...sister. She came here because she wanted a break. She didn't even tell us where she would be staying and didn't want to be contactable. But now there's an emergency matter that needs her back home, hence I'm here."

He saw a need to lie so that James could give him what he needed.

-James: "I see. She always comes here with Patrick. I think they stay in the same hotel. The DoubleTree by Hilton Naha not Shuri Castle, don't be confused since they are two."

Chris' face lit up. A lead at last. And he knew the hotel he was talking about, he had been there during the day.

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The next morning, Chris woke up and got ready to leave. When he was done, he went to check out and took a cab to the airport. He got there an hour before his 10:30 flight. In his heart he was hoping to see Sthandiwe even though he knew that she was only going to come back in the evening. So basically, he was wasting his time and the sad part was that he knew it.

His time to board came, and his heart became more heavy. He didn't want to leave but he had to. In fact, he had mixed feelings. A part of him wanted to stay and wait for Sthandiwe but another part wanted to get home as soon as possible so he could be with his father and see what was wrong with him. But he couldn't split himself in half, he couldn't be in two places at the same time, so he chose the latter. He went to board his flight and left the love of his life behind. But with the hope that he would get to see her when he comes back.

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And of course, in Osaka, Sthandiwe had no idea that her man was looking for her. She woke up and freshened up then joined Patrick for breakfast. In the few days that she had been in Osaka, she had gotten to feast on a few Japanese dishes that she was unfamiliar with, and she loved them. But mostly she got to eat Japanese dishes that she had tasted before, those that are popular in the West, and other Western dishes. Because Patrick's in-laws were very Western.

Anyway, after breakfast they didn't go to the shelter, Patrick was going to show her around Osaka. It was going to be a pity being in the city for 3 days but then leave without exploring it.

It is without a doubt a beautiful city. Patrick took her to some popular beautiful places and they took tons of pictures with his camera. They were definitely having some crazy fun. But things changed as they were walking out of Universal Studios.

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for bringing me here, Rick. Really."

-Patrick: "Don't mention it. So, what was the highlight of this trip for you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Everything. Seriously, I can't pick one. But I must say getting to know more about you was interesting. And I got to know that we both have some European blood in our veins."

-Patrick: "Is that a fact?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yep. My mom was English. Or British as you Americans would say. But she and her family were living in SA when she met my father. And when she married him, her family disowned her and they later moved back to England. And they only made contact in 2012. As if they knew that she would pass away that very same year... Apparently they live in Kent in England. I've never been there though, never met any of them."

-Patrick: "See, I didn't know any of that. You never mentioned it."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, it never came up in our conversations... Her name was Anne Adkins. AA. And my father was Buyisile Blie. BB. Funny, right?"

-Patrick: (laughing) "Yeah, that's so fuckin' funny. No kidding."

Just then his R100-worth cell phone (in our currency) rang. He took it out and excused himself. He stepped aside to answer it. When he came back, the look on his face said it all. Whatever that call was about, wasn't good.

-Sthandiwe: "Are you okay?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, I'm alright. But I gotta go back to Ireland ASAP. So that means I won't be going back to Okinawa with you this afternoon. I'm sorry."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, don't worry about me. I'm worried about you. Is everything alright with your family?"

-Patrick: "I'm not sure. I'll get to know once I get there. Let's get going."

Sthandiwe could see that he didn't want to talk about what was going on so she let him be. They went back to the house and Patrick transferred all the pictures they had just taken from his camera to his laptop.

-Patrick: "You can take the laptop with you. I'm not gonna need it but you will, for your OIST application."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, buddy."

Then they packed their bags. The in-laws came back from the office as they were finishing up. Patrick told them about the emergency he had to attend to in Ireland. Sthandiwe thanked them for their hospitality. Then they both said their goodbyes and left.

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They rode together to Osaka International Airport. But Sthandiwe was going to take her flight back to Okinawa solo, and that hurt a little. When she got her ticket, Patrick had to leave her. He wasn't going to take his flight there, he was going to take it at Kansai International Airport. Because even though it is still called "international", Osaka International Airport only caters for domestic flights. He said his goodbyes with glassy eyes.

-Sthandiwe: " This isn't goodbye, it's 'see you later', right?"

-Patrick: "I don't know, Tee. I honestly don't know when I'll get to see you again. In the meantime I'll call the hotel back in Okinawa and arrange for my belongings in the room I was staying in to be stored safely. The bill is settled."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. But I really hope we'll get to see each other again. And I hope everything is okay with your family."

-Patrick: "Yeah, me too."

He looked deep into her eyes and put his hand over her heart.

-Patrick: "Listen, you're a great person, Tee. And in here, you have a beautiful heart. Never ever think otherwise, okay? What you did in the past doesn't define who you are, all it defines are the circumstances you were under at the time. You said the butterfly on your back means transformation, right? And I believe you have changed. The fact that you show remorse for everything you did makes me believe that you are not that person anymore. Now what you need to do is to forgive yourself, and don't forget to pray and ask for God's forgiveness and also ask Him to give you more strength to deal with that guilt, okay? But I don't doubt that you're strong. In fact, you're the strongest person I've ever met. So please, don't let yourself down and do something stupid like hurting yourself when I'm gone, okay?"

Patrick was a Christian, and he used to say he drew much of his strength from prayer. Hence he was advising Sthandiwe to also do the same. And taking that advice was pretty easy for her because she knew that he was preaching to her what he was practising. In the two nights that they had spent in Osaka, she witnessed it. She would see him at night, just before he goes to bed, praying in the backyard. His in-laws were Bhuddists so he couldn't pray in the house.

She nodded, with tears threatening to escape her eyes. Then she gave him a hug. He held her tight. And the hug lingered. They were both getting emotional as it registered to both of them that they may never get to see each other again. Eventually, they pulled back.

-Sthandiwe: "Peace be with you."

Patrick just nodded, he avoided to speak because he knew that his voice would break and tears would fall. And he didn't want that. He walked off, leaving Sthandiwe standing there, emotional as fuck. She watched after him until he disappeared. In the two weeks that they had spent together, they had

gotten very close. So parting ways really hurt. Especially because, even though none of them said it out loud, they both knew that chances of them seeing each other again were slim to none.

She stood like that for what felt like eternity and only snapped out of it when she had to go board her flight.

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She got to Okinawa just after 19:00 and went to her hotel. When she walked through, the front desk was empty. She just passed and went straight to the elevator. She got to her room and went to take a shower. When she was done she put on a robe and went to sit on the bed. She sure felt lonely without Patrick. But she decided to keep busy by starting her OIST application. She took Patrick's laptop and connected it to the internet. Once she got connected, she got tempted to check her emails. She logged on to her gmail email account hoping to see at least one email from Chris. But there was none. Without realising, Chris had sent the email to her work email address. And she didn't think he would do that. So she didn't see a reason to access that email account.

-Sthandiwe: "I was so stupid for thinking he misses me. Tsk! Let me just start my application."

And she did. She slept around 22:00, but under those covers she couldn't stop worrying about Patrick. Was he going to be okay? Was his family okay? Those questions rotated in her head until she dozed off.

In the morning, she woke up and freshened up. Then went downstairs for breakfast. She used to have breakfast with Patrick but now she was flying solo. There were people around her but without Patrick she felt so alone. She got done then went to get ready to go to the dojo. Her hand had now healed so she was good for the training.

After the training she went to tell Sensei about Patrick, that he had left and he wasn't going to be back at the dojo any time soon. Sensei just asked if she wasn't now feeling lonely at the hotel now that her friend was gone. She couldn't deny it, she told him the truth. The hotel felt empty without him. And she really needed someone to talk to every now and then, so without Patrick around she felt like she would go crazy in that hotel. When he heard her talking like that, Sensei asked her to move out of the hotel and move in with his family. She didn't hesitate, she jumped at the opportunity. She had gotten to meet his family in the past week and they were good people, so living with them was going to be nice, she thought. So she went back to the hotel and packed all her belongings then went to the front desk to check out. The lady there was not the one Chris had left the message with. This one didn't know anything about that message. She just checked Sthandiwe out. And Sthandiwe was off to live with the Makishi family.

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A week passed and Chris Senior (Mr Motaung) was still not out of hospital. So Chris couldn't go back to Okinawa as he thought he would. All he could do was to keep checking his emails for Sthandiwe's response. But he would find nothing from her. He wasn't sure why she wouldn't respond to the email or even call. A part of him wanted to think she wasn't responding because she had moved on, but his heart didn't want to accept that. So when his father got well in the second week, he got a chance to get on a plane to go see what was really going on with her. To see her and talk with her face to face.

He landed in Naha and the first place he went to was the hotel he knew her to be staying in. When he got there, he was met by the same receptionist he had left the message with two weeks earlier. She told him that she didn't get to give Sthandiwe the message because when she came back on duty she had checked out. Out of desperation, he asked if she knew where she went. But obviously, the receptionist didn't know anything. He felt his heart sink, but he tried to compose himself. He left and went to the Dojo Bar to talk to James. To ask him if he had passed the message to Sthandiwe, and if he knew where she was now staying. But James wasn't in. He wasn't even on the island, he was visiting his home country, England. But even if he was in, he would tell him that he didn't get to give her the message and he didn't know her whereabouts. Because ever since she came back from Osaka she hadn't been to the Dojo Bar. She was now staying with the Makishi family so she didn't have time to go hang out at the bar. Besides, the bar only opens at 19:00 and closes at 01:00, so she couldn't be out that late. She had to respect the elders she was now living with.

Chris left there with his heart completely shattered, because now he didn't know where he would find her. He went to the hotel he was going to be staying in and slept. The following day, he searched for her again. But when he couldn't find her, he thought she had probably left the main island to the neighbouring small islands, since she was a tourist. He spent days looking in those islands, in all the tourist sites, but with no luck. He returned to the main island disappointed as hell. No, that's an understatement. He felt like he was walking with his heart under the soles of his shoes. That's how much it hurt. He didn't stick around Naha this time around, he went straight to the airport, got on a plane and flew back home. He went back to Cape Town, back to work, even though he didn't feel like it. It was something he had to do.

Days went by, still nothing from Sthandiwe. Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. Still nothing. And the pain in his heart was not subsiding. It still hurt the same way it did the day Sthandiwe left. And he still missed her the same way.

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In Okinawa, Sthandiwe was still staying with the Makishi family, and they were really good to her. You would find her in the dojo, training hard, everyday. And she was also strong in prayer even though she was the only Christian in the family. Hell, a Christian in an island full of people who believed in Niraikanai, which is the realm of the dead beyond the sea. But that didn't stop her from believing in her God, she would pray under the covers at night. And God was showing Himself in her life. She had managed to make a remarkable progress in what she was on the island for. Which is healing, finding inner peace and finding herself again.

And being with the Makishi family helped her learn some Japanese. She could now construct full sentences in Japanese, without mixing it with English. And that was another great achievement for her. And she had learned a lot about Okinawan customs, which are vastly different from anything she was used to. So yeah, basically things were looking up.

She had never, not even once, accessed her work email account. Which meant she still hadn't seen Chris' email. She had accepted the fact that they were really over and she was slowly but surely forgetting about him. The pain of losing him had now subsided. And she was now focusing on herself. But she couldn't stop worrying about Patrick. Wondering if he was okay, or if he was even still alive wherever he was. She hadn't heard from him since the day they parted ways at the airport in October. And that was 2 months earlier. She missed him. She would even find herself on the phone box calling his number even though she knew that it was inactive wherever he was. The only thing she had of him was the photos they took together in Osaka. She would look at them, see how happy they were and wonder if he was that happy wherever he was or if he was dead, considering the fact that he had a gang of thugs out for his blood.

It was now Christmas Eve and she was walking out of the dojo, looking down, minding her own business when she heard someone calling her name. She recognised that voice, she looked up and it was really her buddy, Patrick. A wide smile found its way to her face instantly. And they ran to each other and pulled each other into an embrace. But they quickly pulled back when they saw their Sensei approaching. Patrick quickly went to bow in front of him, greeting him. He greeted back and welcomed him back to the island. Then walked away.

-Sthandiwe: (talking fast) "Dude, where the hell have you been? I've been worried sick about you, you know that? Are you okay? Is your family okay?"

-Patrick: (smiling) "Hey, slow down, will you? I'm okay and my family is okay as well. A few days after I left I called your hotel room to tell you that I was okay, but I couldn't find you. And when I called the front desk they told me that you had checked out."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm now staying with Sensei and his family."

-Patrick: "Oh. And how's that working out?"

-Sthandiwe: "Pretty good, actually. You know that they are good people. And they've been teaching me how to speak Japanese. So yeah, I really like staying with them."

-Patrick: "That's good. Think Sensei would mind if I steal you for a few days?"

-Sthandiwe: "Where to?"

-Patrick: "Osaka. I've been there for a week now. And tomorrow is my birthday. And my in-laws are throwing me this huge party and I'd like for you to be there. What do you say?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I'd like that. But we'll have to ask Sensei first."

-Patrick: "Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way."

-Sthandiwe: "Then let's go...And hey, why didn't you tell me that you share your birthday with Jesus?"

They both laughed. And made their way to the Makishi house.

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They talked to Sensei and asked for his permission to leave. He had no problem with that. So Sthandiwe packed her bag and they took a cab to the airport.

-Patrick: "I really missed you, hey. I missed how you call me. You know that you're the only person who calls me Rick, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, I know. Hey, dude, I'm unique and everything I do or say with my mouth is unique."

She said that joking. They both laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "There's also one person who calls me differently. Around here, y'all call me Tee. Back home most people call me Thandi. But one person, just one person, calls me ST. And that's KG."

-Patrick: "Your ride or die."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. And speaking of, I think I should call him tomorrow and wish him a Merry Christmas."

-Patrick: "Yeah, you should."

They got to the airport, got their tickets and when the time came they went to board their flight.

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They landed in Osaka just after 18:00. But Sthandiwe had to pass by the mall and buy gifts for Patrick's in-laws and for Patrick, of course. Then they left. They got home and Patrick's in-laws were still the same sweet people she knew them to be. They welcomed her with open arms. And they loved the fact that she had chosen to spend Christmas with them. The few Bhuddists she knew back home didn't celebrate Christmas, but in Japan some celebrated it. And Patrick's in-laws were among those who did. But they didn't celebrate it as a religious holiday but more of a family holiday, where everyone comes together and show each other some love.

They all slept late that night, chatting. And they were impressed that she could now speak some Japanese.

The next day, on Christmas, they all got up and prepared for Patrick's party. He was turning 31. And he was going to have a huge black-tie party, starting in the afternoon. Sthandiwe went with his mother-in-law to check if everything was going okay at the venue. They had a party planner but she wanted to make sure. They got there and found the décor people still busy. The way everything looked, it sure was going to be a classy party. That showed just how much they loved Patrick. No expenses were spared. And Sthandiwe knew that she had to have her hair and nails done before the party started.

She had to look the part, hey. And from what the mother-in-law said, there were classy guests in the guest list, since the party was going to double as a Christmas party. So she really had to look good.

She left her there, giving some orders to the decorators, and went to a phone box to call KG. But his phone went straight to voicemail. She left a message, wishing him a Merry Christmas and telling him that she would be extending her stay in Okinawa. Then she went back to the mother-in-law. They stayed for a few more minutes making sure that everything was okay, then they went back to the house. The mother-in-law called her beauty technician. She arrived with her assistant. And they did Sthandiwe's hair, mani, pedi, the works. Then later they all dressed up and went to the venue. BB's daughter was looking good. And her make up was on flick. The party was definitely classy and lit, and she fitted right in. Even though she was sticking out like a sore thumb, being the only African in there. But she didn't let that get in her way of having fun. She was already used to being the only African in a house full of Asians.

She got to mingle with a few of Japan's socialites that had attended the party. Patrick's in-laws were not only well-off, they were also well-known. So there were few of Japan's who's whos in there.

So basically, Sthandiwe had an amazing and colourful Christmas.

But for Chris it was different. It was black and dull. He was spending it home with his parents and sisters but there was something missing, someone actually. It was boring and lonely without Sthandiwe.

And when he got to hear from KG that she was extending her stay in Okinawa, he gave up hope. He had already started counting days till she would come back, but when he heard that, he stopped counting. There was no point hoping at all. Because he didn't know when she would come back.

He had also made peace with spending New Year's without her, until on Monday, December 28th when he received a call he didn't expect.

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It was a local landline number calling Chris, and he answered almost immediately. It was someone he wasn't expecting to hear from again - Alizwa. He was calling from prison where he had been

transferred to await his trial. He asked to see him immediately, saying it was about Sthandiwe. Chris hesitated but then agreed. He dropped what he was doing and rushed to the prison, only because Alizwa had mentioned Sthandiwe. Maybe he was going to help him after all.

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He got there and got to see him. He didn't look like the Alizwa he knew, he looked terrible, like death warmed over. Prison was evidently unkind to him.

-Chris: "Man, you look like hell."

-Alizwa: "Hence you're here. I wanna get out of this shit hole. So is your offer still on the table?"

Chris chuckled.

-Chris: "Oh, now he's interested... Didn't you say you wanted to pay for what you did to me? Didn't you say you wanted to be in here?"

-Alizwa: "It wasn't all about that. I also didn't wanna get out because I didn't have anything to go home to. I mean no one. Thandi hated me. She didn't want me anywhere near her."

-Chris: "Oh, so it was about her. Now tell me, are things any different now? Has she stopped hating you?"

-Alizwa: "No. But I've accepted that. And I believe I've paid enough for what I did to you. I didn't kill you after all. And I've been having it rough in here for little over 2 months waiting for a trial that's only going to start later next month. I've had it and I'd rather be lonely outside than in here. So, I'm gonna ask again. Is your offer still on the table?"

-Chris: "Thandi is still not back yet. And I don't know when she'll be. So yes, the offer still stands."

-Alizwa: "Then get my ass out of this place...Pun intended."

-Chris: "First tell me where you think Thandi is and I'll get your ass out."

-Alizwa: "No. You get me out, then and only then I'll get you what you need."

-Chris: "And how do I know you won't screw me over once you're out?"

-Alizwa: "You don't. You just gonna have to trust me, take my word. Make this happen."

Chris took his word. He made it happen. And Alizwa was out later that very same day.

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On the other side of the world, Sthandiwe and Patrick were now both back in Okinawa. Patrick was back at the hotel but Sthandiwe was still living with the Makishi family.

On New Year's Eve they were getting out of the dojo, chasing each other, just fooling around, laughing. But when Sthandiwe looked across the street she stopped short and that laugh faded in an instant. She couldn't believe her eyes. Alizwa was standing there, leaning on a rental car, arms folded.

Patrick noticed the shock on her face. And his eyes moved from her to where she was looking at, across the street, to Alizwa.

-Patrick: "What, you know that guy?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. That's Al, my ex."

Patrick knew all about Sthandiwe's drama with Alizwa. She had told him everything.

-Patrick: "What is he doing here?"

-Sthandiwe: "I honestly don't know. I don't even know how he found me."

-Patrick: "Look, you don't have to talk to him if you don't want to."

-Sthandiwe: "No, it's okay, I'll talk to him. I want to hear what he's doing here."

They crossed the street together to where Alizwa was standing.

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He smiled as Sthandiwe came to stand before him.

-Alizwa: "Thando lwam [My love]"

But Sthandiwe was not smiling, not even close.

-Sthandiwe: "What are you doing here, Alizwa?"

-Alizwa: "You're not even going to greet me?"

-Sthandiwe: "What are are you doing here? I thought you were behind bars."

-Alizwa: "I got out. And now I want us to talk."

He said that throwing Patrick a dirty look.

-Alizwa: "In PRIVATE."

But Patrick didn't move even an inch.

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay, Rick. You can give us some privacy."

Patrick nodded and walked away, but he didn't leave completely. He just stood at a fair distance.

-Sthandiwe: "You said you wanted to talk, so talk."

-Alizwa: "How have you been? You look good."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't think you came all this way just to say that, Alizwa. Why are you here?"

He told himself that he wasn't going to tell her that it was actually Chris who wanted to find her. He was only going to make his own case. Screwing Chris over in the process. Chris was stupid for letting him be the one to bring her back home.

-Alizwa: "I heard about our baby. What happened to him? And why didn't you tell me anything?"

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, you can't come here and remind me of something I worked so hard to put behind me."

-Patrick: "You want to forget about him? You want to forget about our baby? Are you even listening to yourself, Thandi? That's your baby you're talking about. You can't just forget about him. I mean I know I can't. I think about him everyday."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, good for you. Just don't come here and try to make me feel guilty for wanting to move on."

-Alizwa: "What really happened to him? Tell me. Are you sure you didn't abort him? The way you're talking about him makes me think you did. Hell, I know you didn't want him from the beginning."

That infuriated Sthandiwe but she tried to control her anger.

-Sthandiwe: "Now you're trying to piss me off. I didn't abort my baby, Alizwa, I miscarried. Miscarried. Yes, I wanted an abortion at first but I changed my mind. I wanted to carry that baby full term, Alizwa, I wanted to. It didn't matter how much I hated its father."

-Alizwa: "Oh, so you hate me?"

-Sthandiwe: "What do you expect, Alizwa? You came into my life and turned it upside down. I don't even know why you're here. What do you want from me? Huh? What do you want?"

-Alizwa: "What do I want? I want you, Sthandiwe. I want you. Look, I know that I hurt you, but I apologised for all that. And I know that we didn't end things on a good note but we both can't deny that we had something good. Can't we start over? On a clean slate. And I promise that I'll do things differently this time around."

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "You're sick, aren't you? Are you even listening to yourself?"

-Alizwa: "I don't drink, Sthandiwe. I'm sober-minded. I know exactly what I'm saying. I love you and when I was in prison all I could think about was you. Wondering where you were, how you were doing and if you ever think about me."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, if you really want to know, you never crossed my mind not even once. Now could you please stay away from me? Please, I'm trying to put my life back together. I don't need unnecessary complications."

-Alizwa: "Oh, so I'm a complication. Because you've found someone new, right?"

He looked at Patrick.

-Alizwa: "Him? Really, Thandi? You think he's better than me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Now you're out of line, Alizwa. And I've already given you much of my time. I'm leaving now."

She said that already turning to leave. But he roughly grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. Patrick saw that and took strides to them.

-Patrick: "What the hell's going on here?"

-Alizwa: "Whatever's going on doesn't concern you. So take a step a back."

Sthandiwe yanked her arm off of his grip and took a step back.

-Sthandiwe: "Rick, let's go."

But Alizwa jumped in front of Patrick, blocking his way.

-Alizwa: "Listen here, you better stay away from Thandi. Or else..."

-Patrick: (calmly) "Or else what?"

Alizwa answered that by coming closer to his face until their faces were about an inch apart. The look in his eyes was scary. He looked like he was going to throw a mean punch. But Patrick didn't move, he remained calm. He could kick the shit out of Alizwa if he wanted to but he didn't want that. He was a disciplined adult.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa, please calm down. This is Okinawa not SA. You don't do that kinda shit here. Please step back."

He complied. He stepped back.

-Alizwa: "Fine, you can go with your man."

He went back to his car and slammed the door.

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Sthandiwe and Patrick left. They walked down the road, Patrick taking her home.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry about what just happened, Rick. I really am."

-Patrick: "No. You don't have to apologise. You didn't do anything. He did. And I honestly don't give a fuck about it."

That was the last thing he said. The next thing Sthandiwe heard was a horrific sound and car tyres screeching. Patrick was down. And Alizwa was speeding off with his car. He had just hit Patrick intentionally. And everything happened so fast.

Alizwa was a smart guy, an academic. But when it came to other stuff, you'd swear he took that brain of his on vacation. He didn't think at all. He had just done something stupid, once again. Just like he did with Chris.

Sthandiwe quickly went down on her knees to check Patrick who was lying on the road bleeding. He wasn't moving. He just lay there motionless. People were now gathering around to see what was going on. Sthandiwe screamed for any of them to call an ambulance. Patrick wasn't looking good. She felt his pulse and it was fading. She shook him, frantically.

-Sthandiwe: "Patrick? Patrick? Come on, open your eyes."

But he couldn't. He was quickly fading.

-Sthandiwe: "No, no, no, you can't do this to me, Patrick. No. Do you remember when you told me about how you lost your wife? We were on a plane to Osaka. You told me how those guys took her life and that of your unborn baby. And I thought how could anyone survive that. But you did. You did. And you saved me too. Patrick, you pulled me out of the darkness when I had no one else to. Because you're strong, and you became strong for me too. I need you to be strong even now, for yourself. Please... When you were gone, Patrick, there were days that were hard for me. Where I'd find myself suffocating with no one to talk to. But what you said to me at the airport the day you left kept me going. You told me that I was the strongest person you've ever met. And that I should remain strong. You saved me, Patrick. And now I want you to save yourself. Please."

She was crying as she crouched next to him, shaking him.

The ambulance came in no time and the paramedics took over. As they attended to him, the police also arrived at the scene. They wanted to talk to anyone who had witnessed what had happened. Sthandiwe didn't hesitate, she told them everything and who the assailant was. Then she took a taxi to be with Patrick at the hospital.

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She got there and she had to wait. After 2 hours they told her she could go in and see him. She walked into his ward. His head was bandaged, face bruised, and he had a broken leg, it was elevated and had a plaster cast. He looked bad but he tried to smile when he saw her.

-Patrick: "Hey. I'm glad you're here."

-Sthandiwe: "There's no where else I'd rather be. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Rick. You're here because of me."

-Patrick: "No. No. Don't do that. You didn't run me over with a car. Al did. Case closed."

She nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "How are you feeling?"

-Patrick: "Not as bad as I look, that's for sure... Hey, I heard everything you said at the scene. It's funny that you had to wait until I got hit by a car before you said all that. Just so you know, it helped. I held on because of it."

Sthandiwe laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "You're talking as if I confessed my love for you... 'Never' seems too soon for that."

He tried to laugh but it hurt. Just then the police walked in wanting to talk to him. And they told them that Alizwa had just been apprehended at the airport. Sthandiwe sighed. A part of her felt sorry for him but hey, what was he thinking? Really?

As the police talked to Patrick, she took out his phone from the paper bag that had his belongings and stepped outside to make a phone call. She dialled Yandisa's number, recalling it from memory, and told her what had happened to Alizwa. That was all she was willing to do to help. What happened after that was going to be Yandisa's problem and her brother's. She didn't want to be part of it. She didn't even want to go see him in custody.

She spent the rest of New Year's Eve at the hospital. When the New Year's countdown and fireworks went off she was still there, at the hospital. She just didn't want to leave Patrick alone. She also spent New Year's there.

Then on the 2nd, Patrick got discharged. But he couldn't stay at the hotel alone with his injuries, he had to be taken care of. So he went back to Osaka to stay with his in-laws. Besides, he was in Okinawa for Karate training, which he now wasn't going to be able to do with those injuries. So there was no point staying.

But he came back on the 9th. Just to spend a day with Sthandiwe, because she was going home the following day. Her visa status hadn't been changed yet and her 90-day visa was expiring so she had to go home.

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They spent the entire day together. And on the 10th, she packed her suitcases, said her goodbyes and thank yous to the Makishis and left with Patrick to the airport.

-Patrick: "We're gonna see each other again, right? But when you come back here later this month I won't be here."

-Sthandiwe: "It doesn't matter. I'll keep in touch, I'll call and if you'll still be in Osaka I'll visit you as soon as I'm back here. You're not going back home, right?"

-Patrick: "Oh hell no. I'll be in Ireland or Osaka. I can't go back home, not when those guys are still looking for me. I have triple citizenship so lemme take advantage of that."

-Sthandiwe: "But don't you think those guys also know the countries you have citizenship in? It's been 6 months now since you left home. The fact that they haven't tracked you down even now...beats me. But don't get too comfortable. They will get to you."

-Patrick: "I'll be fine."

-Sthandiwe: "You never told me what was going on with your family when you had to rush back to Ireland."

-Patrick: "There was a breach in security where they were. But I moved them to a more secure place, they are safe now."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good...Give me your phone so I can save my phone number."

He handed it to her and she saved the number.

-Sthandiwe: "As long as you're still in Osaka I'll call you. But call me and tell me when you go back to Ireland and give me the number you will be using there. Okay?"

-Patrick: "You got it... Safe travels. And I must say I enjoyed spending time with you on this island."

-Sthandiwe: "Me too. You're the first person I got to speak to on this island and, without a doubt, you made my stay here a comfortable one. So thank you."

They hugged then she said her goodbyes and walked away to board. But Patrick called after her. She stopped and turned.

-Patrick: "Hey, I never said it but I like that boyish look of yours."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Don't be fooled, I'm able to rock any look."

-Patrick: "I know. I've seen all sides of you. It's safe to say I know you very well."

She laughed and started walking again, but on reverse.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you can open that envelope now."

-Patrick: "But you said after 6 months. It's only been 3."

-Sthandiwe: "6 divide by 2 that's 3."

She was yelling because she was now at a distance, about to get through the gate. And Patrick also yelled back.

-Patrick: "You're crazy. Bye."

-Sthandiwe: "Bye."

She waved then walked through the gate. She went to board her flight. Leaving Okinawa and everything that happened there behind. Including Alizwa who was still in custody. She had indeed never been to see him. But she knew that they were still trying to get him out. She couldn't give a

damn what happened to him. All she cared about was the fact that she had gotten what she was on the island for, her mission was accomplished.

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She landed in OR Tambo around 15:00 the next day, on Monday 11th. She went to buy herself a new cell phone then took a cab home. She got to the house and KG seemed to have been staying there, but he was now not in. The holidays were over for him. He was back at work, and it was his first day in 2016.

Sthandiwe went upstairs to her bedroom and put her suitcases in the closet, unpacked. Then she went to take a shower and put on something more comfortable, a maxi dress and flip flops. She was now feeling refreshed and she could think. She took out her new phone and put on her old SIM card that she had left behind. Immediately when she turned the phone on several messages came through but she ignored them and called KG. He was pleasantly surprised to know that she was back home, because he didn't know when she was coming back. They talked for some time. Then she hung up and called Sihle, then Palesa and Xolisa and told them all that she was back. They were all excited that she was back but none of them told her that Chris was looking for her.

After the calls, she went downstairs and went to sit in front of the TV. She was hungry but she didn't feel like eating. She just laid on the couch and caught up on TV. But she ended up passing out on the couch. She was tired. Jetlagged. She got woken up by a knock at the door. She jumped and went to open thinking it was KG, but she got surprised to find Chris standing there, hands tucked in the front pockets of his jeans.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris?"

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam. [My love]"

-Sthandiwe: "O batlang mona? [What are you doing here?]"

-Chris: "Ke batla ho bua le wena. Ka kopo. [I want to talk to you. Please.]"

-Sthandiwe: "Wena, o batla ho bua le nna? [You, want to talk to me?] Correct me if I'm wrong, Chris, but the last time I saw you I was the one who wanted to talk but you said you had nothing to talk to me about. So what do you want to talk about now?"

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Chris couldn't answer that. At least not while standing outside.

-Sthandiwe: "Ndibuzile. Ufuna nton' apha? Wath' ufun' uthetha kodwa ngok' uthule. [I asked. What are you doing here? And you said you wanted to talk but now you're quiet.]"

-Chris: "I know I'm ignorant or any other word that fits, and it's no longer funny even if it was at first. I mean I've been living in Cape Town for years but I still don't understand isiXhosa, let alone speaking it. So please, sthandwa sam, speak slowly so I could try and understand what you're saying."

He was extremely nervous. Sthandiwe couldn't help but laugh. And she decided to cut him some slack.

-Sthandiwe: (still smiling) "You're hopeless. Just come in."

Seeing her laugh made Chris relax a little.

-Chris: "Thank you."

He walked inside.

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They went to the lounge. And Chris sat down on the couch.

-Sthandiwe: "I'd offer you something to drink but this was KG's crib so I don't know what he has in the kitchen."

Chris chuckled.

-Chris: "But I'm sure he has water."

-Sthandiwe: "Ri-i-i-ght. I'll get it for you."

She went to the kitchen and checked if there was any bottled water in the fridge. There were a few bottles and she took out one. Then she grabbed a glass, rinsed it and took it together with the water to the lounge. Chris poured the water in the glass for himself and gulped it down nervously. Sthandiwe sat down next to him.

-Sthandiwe: "So how did you know that I was back?"

He let out a nervous smile.

-Chris: "Should I give you all their names? The first person to call me was KG, then Xolisa, Palesa and finally Sihle."

Sthandiwe just had to laugh.

-Sthandiwe: "I should have known, hey."

The atmosphere was now relaxed. And Chris was getting more ground to stand on.

-Chris: "You really look good. Life on the island was great for you, I see."

-Sthandiwe: "It was okay. Your smile looks good too. I see you had that dental implant."

-Chris: "There was no way I wasn't gonna go ahead and do it. I mean you left me the money for it. I just never got a chance to thank you."

-Sthandiwe: "No need to thank me. I promised to give you the money and that's exactly what I did. A promise is a promise."

-Chris: "Right... But if I had gotten a chance to see you when I was on that island I would have thanked you."

-Sthandiwe: "On the island? What island?"

-Chris: "Okinawa. I went there to look for you."

He told her everything. From the day he missed her by a few seconds at OR Tambo airport to the last day he left Naha airport heartbroken.

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Sthandiwe was in disbelief.

-Sthandiwe: "OMG it was really you."

-Chris: "It was me what?"

-Sthandiwe: "Back in October I thought I saw you walking out of the Hilton hotel, where I was staying. I called out for you but evidently you couldn't hear me. I ran after you but when I exited to the street I couldn't see you. So I ended up telling myself that you were just in a fantasy. That I was imagining things."

-Chris: "You weren't imagining anything, sthandwa sam, I was there. But every time I went there I had a cab wait for me by the entrance. So I'd get out and hop onto it. I guess that's why you didn't see me when you exited to the street."

-Sthandiwe: "Wow. You were actually there."

-Chris: "I also sent you an email with videos of me telling you all this and more. Didn't you get it?"

-Sthandiwe: "I last checked my emails 3 days ago and I didn't see any email from you. Unless...unless you sent it to my work email address. Did you? I never checked that one since I left."

-Chris: "Schucks! I must have used that one without even realising it...But it no longer matters. We are both here now and I'm gonna tell you exactly what I wanted to tell you back in Okinawa. Thandi, I

know that breaking off our engagement crushed your heart and your spirit. And I am so sorry for that. I wish I could press a delete button somewhere and get rid of all that period of pain in your life. I was stupid and selfish. I thought only about my own heart, I didn't think about you. I didn't think about how my actions would hurt you. And I'll forever be sorry for that. My heart has been leaking and bleeding since the day I hurt you. I was so wrong... and foolish. You were the best thing that I ever had and because of my stupidity you became the most valuable thing I've ever lost. Regret, heartbreak and sadness stole my happiness since the day I broke off our engagement. I am so sorry for letting you down, MamTshawe. I am sorry for breaking my promise to you. I promised you that nothing would ever scare me away from you. I promised to love you till the end, but I failed to do that. The first storm that came our way, I ran for cover and left you in the cold to fend for yourself. And I am sorry for that. I am not saying sorry only because I know that I was wrong, but I am saying sorry also because our relationship is more important to me than my ego. I need you in my life, sthandwa sam. I love you, Sthandiwe Blie, I do. And I don't ever wanna be away from you. I don't ever wanna see you cry again especially because of me. But if you don't want me back I'll understand."

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Sthandiwe kept quiet for a moment, staring in his eyes, taking in everything he had just said. Then she finally spoke.

-Sthandiwe: "I acknowledge that you went through so much trouble trying to find me because you love me, and..."

-Chris: (interrupting) "You have no idea. I even got Alizwa out of prison just so I could have you back here."

-Sthandiwe: "What?"

-Chris: "Yeah, I did. Two weeks ago. We had a quid pro quo deal. I needed you to come back home fast and he needed a get-out-of-jail-free card. So if I played ball, he would tell me where you were. But before he could tell me anything, I had to go back to Cape Town. There was something that needed me urgently at work so I couldn't leave. He offered to go get you and I let him. But obviously he didn't come back with you."

-Sthandiwe: "He didn't come back at all."

She told him everything that happened back in Okinawa, what Alizwa did. And that he was now in an Okinawan prison.

-Sthandiwe: "So basically, you scratched his back and he whipped yours."

-Chris: "But the universe took care of him. Karma got his ass. I hope he rots in that prison."

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-Sthandiwe: "As I was saying before you interrupted me earlier, I can see that you really wanted me back home. All that trouble you went through. And I hear what you're saying, that you want me back. But, Chris, truth is if I heard this three months back I would have jumped for joy. But now things are different. Chris, we were engaged. You had made promises to me, but you broke them. You hurt and humiliated me. But in the past few months I worked so hard to deal with the pain you caused me. I worked so hard to try and forget about you. And now that I have, you're saying this? Chris, I can't. I can't go back there again. It's not a question of whether I still love you or not, it's a question of trust. Can I trust you not to hurt me again? Can I trust you not to break your promises again? I can't know that for sure. But all I know is that I can't take that chance. I can't go through that same pain again. I'm sorry. But I forgive you. I'm no longer mad, Chris. I'm not. I just can't be with you."

-Chris: "Sthandiwe, I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I know. But I just can't..."

She couldn't finish that sentence. She could see the pain in Chris' eyes and she couldn't help but feel the pain too. She couldn't stand seeing him that hurt but she couldn't take him back. She had to protect her own heart. Chris was really hurt. He opened his mouth to say something but no words could come out. He just got up and went to the door. He got out and went to climb on his motorbike. And paced it on his way home. Leaving Sthandiwe hurt just as he was.

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She went upstairs to the study to get her laptop so she could see the email Chris was talking about. But of course, she couldn't find it because Chris had broken it. She just thought KG had it and she went to her bedroom. She sat on the bed and used her phone to access her emails. She finally got to watch Chris' videos and she couldn't help but be extremely emotional. Tears flooded down her cheeks and she couldn't hold them back. Chris had awakened feelings that she had managed to lock away at the back of her heart. But the unfortunate part was that those feelings weren't the only thing he had managed to bring back, he had also managed to bring back the pain. The pain he caused. The pain she had managed to overcome. It was now back and it hurt. So much. She sat there crying but she finally managed to pull herself together and wiped away those tears. She climbed down the bed and went to put on her PJs then went to bed. If she wasn't tired she wasn't gonna be able to fall asleep that night, but because she was exhausted she dozed off almost immediately. But was she going to be able to move on without Chris?

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The next morning, on Tuesday, Sthandiwe got woken up by the door bell downstairs. She rolled over and reached for her phone to check the time. It was just before 8:00.

-Sthandiwe: "And who the hell is ringing my door bell this early? Yah nhe, welcome home Sthandiwe."

She climbed down the bed and put on a robe over her PJs then went downstairs to open. At the door she found Sihle, Xolisa, KG and Palesa. In their hands they had beer, wine, champagne, chips, a box of sausage and another of lamb chops. A wide smile formed in Sthandiwe's face.

-Sthandiwe: "Awww guys, you're here. Come on in."

They stepped inside and gave her tight warm hugs, welcoming her back. Then she led the way to the kitchen. And they put everything on the counter.

-Sthandiwe: "I really missed you, guys, and it's good to see y'all, but it's Tuesday. Aren't y'all supposed to be at work at this time?"

-KG: "Chill. We all called in sick. We want to spend the day with you."

-Sihle: "We couldn't come yesterday because we wanted to give you some time alone with Chris."

-Palesa: "But don't worry, today we're not gonna talk about him. Whatever happened between you two happened, we're not getting involved. I know that I'm his sister but I can't keep putting myself in the middle of your relationship. I'm here as your friend not as his sister."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good to hear. Thank you all for coming. This is nice. So we're having a braai? [berbecue?]"

-Xolisa: "Yep. We're celebrating your return. And I must say, life around here sucked without you. We really missed you."

Her friends were still her friends and they still loved her. That made her smile.

-Sthandiwe: "I missed you too, guys. Trust me, I did."

-Sihle: "No, you didn't. If you did you would have called. But no, not even one phone call."

-Sthandiwe: "Come on, y'all know why I left. And that's the same reason why I couldn't call. Calling y'all was only going to bring back memories that I was there to forget about. I wasn't gonna make any progress. Y'all understand, right?"

-Palesa: "We do, chomi. We do. And I'm glad you found what you were looking for. I can see that you managed to deal with everything you wanted to deal with. It's written all over your face. You look happy, you're glowing."

Truth is she was happy and doing fine until she talked to Chris. But she wasn't about to bring that up. So she just said:

-Sthandiwe: "I try."

-Palesa: "Now get out of here. Go take a shower so we can get this party started. Go. Chop, chop."

She said that clapping her hands. Sthandiwe couldn't help but laugh.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, ma'am."

She rushed upstairs laughing. It was good to be back home.

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When she was done bathing, she put on a oversized vest, denim bum shorts and Lacoste slides. It was still early in the morning but it was already hot, the annoying January sun. But it wasn't annoying to her, she was enjoying it after leaving winter in Okinawa. She went downstairs and found Sihle and Palesa preparing some salads in the kitchen. KG had some groceries in the house after all.

-Sthandiwe: "It's good to see you prepping food in this kitchen, hey. Just like old times."

-Sihle: "Come join us. We have to get these sides done before they finish with the braai."

She joined them and they were done in no time. Then they went to join the guys under the gazebo. They sat there, chatting, laughing, and having some drinks (beer and wine) and snacks as they waited for the meat to be ready. And when it was ready, they dished up everything and popped the champagne before eating. Then they ate while catching up on everything that had happened in the past 3 months. They were really having fun.

-Palesa: "So what did you bring us from Okinawa? You know me and gifts."

-Sihle: "And the ones you got us for Christmas we all loved them. Thank you, chomi."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad y'all loved them. But I didn't get you anything from Okinawa. I would go to the mall, buy stuff for myself and keep telling myself that I would buy y'all some gifts when I'm about to come back but I didn't get a chance to do all that. But y'all don't need to worry, next time I'll get you something."

-KG: "Next time? You're going back there again?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, by this month end I'll be back there. I got accepted at Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate School. So yah, I gotta leave, hey."

-Xolisa: "Gosh, that's sad. I thought you were back for good."

-Sihle: "And Muzi and I didn't go ahead with the vow renewal ceremony in December. We postponed it to the 23rd of this month, our anniversary day. I convinced him to change the date because I wanted all my friends to be there. I wanted you to be present, chomi. But when KG told us that you were extending your stay in Okinawa I got so disappointed, but we couldn't change the date again. And

then yesterday I received a call from you saying you're back, I was so happy because I now I knew that you'd be present at the ceremony. But now you're telling us this?"

-Sthandiwe: "That's sweet, chomi. I mean, waiting for me. And don't worry, I'll still be here on the 23rd. I won't miss the ceremony for anything. Okay?"

Sihle let out a sigh of relief.

-Sihle: "That's a relief, hey."

-Sthandiwe: "I won't let you down, chomi."

Just then her phone rang. She checked it and it was a private number.

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She excused herself and walked away to answer it.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello."

-Caller: "Tee, it's Patrick. Can we talk?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sure, Rick. What's up? I'm glad you called."

-Patrick: "I wish I was calling under different circumstances though."

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean?"

-Patrick: "I'm back in Ireland now, they took my sister Sunday night."

-Sthandiwe: "What? Who's they?"

-Patrick: "Who else? The guys I was telling you about."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh no. I'm sorry, Rick. What's their demand?"

-Patrick: "They haven't made contact yet."

-Sthandiwe: "Then how do you know that they have her? She could have left on her own accord, Rick. Maybe she got tired of being in hiding."

-Patrick: "I have a contact at the Police Station, a cop, and when I told him that I wanted to open a missing persons report he told me the same thing. And that as cops they can't act until they are sure that she has been taken. That was a bad move anyway, on my part. But, Tee, I'm not paranoid. I know my sister, she wouldn't just disappear. I know for a fact that those guys have her. And I need to get her back. I have to. That's why I'm calling you. I need you to come here and help me deal with them. I know I'm asking a lot but if I had anyone else I trust as much as I trust you I wouldn't have called you. Please, Tee."

Sthandiwe kept quiet for a while. She was standing by the pool and her eyes travelled to her friends sitting under the gazebo, laughing. Leaving them was going to hurt them.

-Sthandiwe: "Rick, I can't. I'm sorry that this is happening but I can't help you. Rick, you know that I worked so hard to leave that kind of life behind. It's dark, I can't go back there. And let's face it, if I agree to do this for you I would be putting an expiry date on my life. Hell, the milk in my fridge would probably have more time than me. In this whole thing blood is gonna be spilled, lives are gonna get lost and I don't want mine to be one of those. Besides, what do I know? You said it yourself, those guys are next level. I'm not. So I can't get involved."

-Patrick: "Tee, please, don't abandon me now. I really need you. You're the only person I trust who can help me with this. Please."

She let out a sigh, then:

-Sthandiwe: "Okay fine, I'm coming. Just organise everything we'll need when I'm there. And get me the documentation to support my case, that I have a valid reason for entering Ireland."

-Patrick: "Okay, I'll do that. Thanks for doing this, Tee. And make sure you pack warm clothes, it's cold up here."

She hung up and took a deep sigh. Then she went back to her friends.

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, I'm sorry but I have to go."

-KG: "Go where?"

-Sthandiwe: "Ireland. But I can't tell you why."

-All of them: (in unison) "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry, guys."

-Palesa: "When are you leaving?"

-Sthandiwe: "Today if I get a flight. I don't need a visa to Ireland but I'll still have to get a few things together, so I really need to go now. KG, you still have the spare key, right?"

-KG: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: "Then y'all don't have to leave now. You can stay and only leave after you've finished up here. But I need to get going, get my things together. I'm really sorry, guys."

None of them said anything. They just swapped looks. Sthandiwe left.

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She got a flight for that evening, in fact it was going to depart at 21:50. She boarded with just a weekend bag. And by 9:40 the next day, on Wednesday, she was at Dublin Airport. She looked around

for Patrick who said he would be there to pick her up. As she was still looking around, she heard a voice behind her.

-Voice: "Looking lost at airports is your thing I see."

She turned around and saw Patrick standing there smiling. A smile found its way to her face too.

-Patrick: "Hey, Tee."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, sailor."

They hugged.

-Sthandiwe: "I know I said I'd love to see you again but I didn't know it would be this soon."

-Patrick: (joking) "I just couldn't stay away from you."

-Sthandiwe: (joking too) "I know I have that effect on people."

They both laughed.

-Patrick: "Hey, thanks for coming."

-Sthandiwe: "Rick, you had my back in Okinawa. I was falling apart but you became strong for me, so I owe you. But forget that. Let's talk about you. Only two weeks ago you got hit by a car and broke your leg but now you don't have a plaster cast and no crutches. What's up with that?"

-Patrick: "My leg wasn't broken, just fractured. A small fracture. But I wanted it to look more serious so no judge would be lenient to Al. But yesterday I had to take the plaster cast off and abandon the crutches so I could walk properly. But for the rec, I did try to have Al released on Monday before I left Okinawa. But they told me that it wasn't up to me. That it was their island and they have to keep it safe. I knew that I was just taking chances. But his sister and the SA Embassy in Japan are trying to get him out."

But Sthandiwe was no longer listening. Her face was looking at him but her eyes were discreetly looking behind him. And what she said next had nothing to do with what he was saying.

-Sthandiwe: "Do you have a car or we're gonna take a taxi?"

-Patrick: "I have a car. Borrowed it from a friend. But this driving on the left side of the road is really a nightmare for me. I bumped the curb two times on my way here. Are you gonna drive now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course not. Now please take my bag and my hand, and let's get outta here."

-Patrick: "Your hand? Are you joking?"

-Sthandiwe: "Rick, jokes are funny. This is not."

-Patrick: "Okay. I'll hold your hand. But aren't you hungry? Why don't we grab something to eat first?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, I'm fine. I'm not hungry. Thanks... Now please take my hand and let's go."

He took her bag and hesitantly took her hand, and they walked out to his car.

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He put the bag in the back seat next to another one that was there, then they got inside and he drove off.

-Patrick: "Really, Tee, what was the holding of hands about?"

-Sthandiwe: "Forget about that. Tell me what you got? Those guys still haven't made contact?"

-Patrick: "They did. Only this morning. They want an exchange. I have to hand myself over to them and they'll release my sister."

-Sthandiwe: "When?"

-Patrick: "This afternoon. 17:30. At Talbot Mall."

-Sthandiwe: "A mall? Great. They've picked a mall because they know that you can't go there with your people guns blazing, there'll be a lot of collateral."

-Patrick: "Exactly. I'm even considering handing myself over to them, Tee. For my sister's sake. My parents are on my case, they want me to bring their daughter back home. And they are right. It's my fault that she got taken, Tee. It's my fault."

-Sthandiwe: "Now you're not thinking straight. You think those guys are gonna release your sister once you hand yourself over to them? No, they won't. Guys like them don't do that. They will kill you both. You can't trust them."

-Patrick: "So what's the plan?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know but we'll figure something out. Got the hardware?"

All this time she couldn't keep her eyes off the rear view mirror.

-Patrick: "Yeah. Heavy machines are back at my place. But I got two concealables under the seat you're sitting on. If we get stopped, then we're screwed."

She looked under the seat and pulled out one of the two pistols that were there.

-Sthandiwe: "Beretta 92FS. Nice. Now where are the suppressors? I don't need no noise when I find myself in a situation that requires trigger-pulling."

-Patrick: "In the bag in the back seat. So are the vests."

She took the bag. Under some clothes that were in there, she pulled out a bulletproof vest. She took off her below-the-knee long coat and the heavy jacket under it. She put on the vest then the jacket back on and threw the coat in the back seat. She got the suppressor out and screwed it on the gun. Then checked the magazine, it was full.

-Patrick: "Why are you gearing up? We won't need all this until this afternoon."

-Sthandiwe: "Proactivity, Rick. Proactivity. (she chuckled) I'm in foreign country and I've just landed but here I am, already holding a gun. I'll probably get fried for this."

-Patrick: "Don't worry, you have me. This is my second home. Chill. Nothing's gonna happen. Let's just go to my place and you can freshen up and rest."

She didn't respond to that. She just put the gun in the large inner pocket of her jacket and tossed the bag in the back seat. Her eyes went back to the rear view mirror as Patrick drove in complete silence. They both had inner thoughts.

They got to Dublin City Centre and Sthandiwe's eyes kept moving from the mirror to outside the window.

-Sthandiwe: "How far?"

-Patrick: "Almost there."

-Sthandiwe: "That's a restaurant across the road. Let's check it out."

-Patrick: "Didn't you say you weren't hungry?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm hungry now. So go park the car and let's get inside. Please."

-Patrick: "Okay, fine."

He went to park and they walked inside the restaurant.

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A waitress showed them a table close to the entrance.

-Sthandiwe: "No, we'll take the one in the corner at the back."

-Patrick: "Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because it has a full view of the room, including the entrance."

The waitress let them go sit at the table they wanted, and they both faced the entrance. The waitress wanted to take their order but they asked her to give them a minute. Just as she walked away, a guy in his early 20s walked in and went to sit on a table near the entrance, facing them.

-Sthandiwe: "Now don't be obvious. But you see that guy that just walked in? He's one of the guys that have your sister. He's their eye. I spotted him watching you back at the airport. That's why I asked you to hold my hand. I wanted him to think..."

-Patrick: (finishing the sentence) "...that you're just my girlfriend and you're not here to assist me in this small war that I have with them. I see now. At least you didn't ask me to kiss you."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, whatever. Please focus. The guy's been following us since we left the airport. That's why I asked you to stop here. I wanted to make sure that I wasn't being paranoid."

-Patrick: "Shit! I had a tail but I didn't spot it."

-Sthandiwe: "Clearly you didn't listen to me. Back in Okinawa I told you to watch your 6, Rick."

-Patrick: "My what?"

-Sthandiwe: "Your back. I told you to watch your back. You were in hiding for goodness sake."

-Patrick: "Now what do we do?"

-Sthandiwe: "Now? We act normal. Let's order anything on this menu and eat like normal people do."

Patrick called the waitress back and they placed their order. The waitress walked away.

-Patrick: "Fuck! I'm trying but knowing that the motherfucker probably followed me all the way from my apartment to the airport is freaking me out."

-Sthandiwe: "You better calm yourself down. And let's talk about something else."

-Patrick: "Oh, yeah, I opened that envelope you gave me and I saw what was inside. (he smiled) Eye of Ra made of copper. Two actually."

-Sthandiwe: "Twins. My father gave one to me when I was 14 and he kept the other. Then I combined them after he passed away."

-Patrick: "Thanks for passing them to me. I carry them in my pocket all the time now."

He said that pulling them out of his front pocket of his jeans.

-Sthandiwe: "Good because according to the Egyptian mythology they are supposed to keep you safe. Protect you from ills and people who wish you bad. And it also symbolises a person that's dear to you. A person that's always there to guide and protect you. My dad was that for me. But I gave them to you because the day I gave them to you I saw how jumpy you were. You hadn't told me about the guys that are after you but I kind of figured it out. And since I knew that I couldn't protect you, I decided to give you those. And hey, you're also dear to me and back in Okinawa you guided me. So yeah, you deserve them. They have a sentimental value to me because I got them from my father but I don't mind them ending up with you."

-Patrick: (smiling) "Mmmh it's good to know that I'm that important to you."

-Sthandiwe: "If you weren't, trust me I wouldn't be here right now."

The waitress came with their food.

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They dug in as they discreetly kept their eye on that guy.

-Sthandiwe: "Could you please lend me your phone?"

-Patrick: "Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm probably gonna die up here and I don't want that to happen with Chris not knowing how I really feel about him. That's not just a line from movies, you know. I gotta do this."

Patrick smiled and shook his head then handed the phone to her. She dialled Chris' number and he answered on the third ring.

-Chris: "Hello."

-Sthandiwe: "Sthandwa sam."

-Chris: "Thandi? Hi. How are you?"

But Sthandiwe had no time to answer that.

-Sthandiwe: "Please repeat what you said to me when you were at my house on Monday."

Even though Chris wasn't sure what she meant by that or where that was going, he said what he felt.

-Chris: "I love you, Thandi, and I promise to never hurt you again. I want..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "I love you too, Chris. And I'm willing to take you back. I wanna be with you. I do."

That shocked Chris. Wondering what could have possibly changed her mind. But nevertheless he was happy.

-Chris: "Really? Why don't you fly down here? And we can talk about this face to face."

She was surprised that he didn't know that she was out of the country. That their mutual friends hadn't told him.

-Sthandiwe: "To Cape Town? That would be a long trip, babe. I'm in Dublin."

-Chris: "What? What are you doing there?"

-Sthandiwe: "I can't tell you that right now. But I'll be home soon."

He definitely didn't like the sound of that. He knew what it meant.

-Chris: "What are you into, Thandi? Don't break my heart. You told me you were through with that hectic life."

-Sthandiwe: "After this, I swear to you, I'm through."

-Chris: "Baby, you promised. Don't do this."

-Sthandiwe: "Everything's gonna be fine. I promise. I gotta go now. I love you."

-Chris: "I love you too. Please come back home in one piece."

-Sthandiwe: "I will."

She hung up and handed the phone back to Patrick.

-Sthandiwe: "I just lied to Chris. I promised him that everything's gonna be fine and that I'll go back to him in one piece, but I know that might not happen."

-Patrick: "What's gonna happen now?"

-Sthandiwe: "You said this was your second home so that means you know Dublin very well, right?"

-Patrick: "Yeah. I just don't know how to drive in its roads and streets."

-Sthandiwe: "You're doing just fine. Now we're gonna go back to your car but you're not gonna drive us to your place. You're gonna drive to a place that you know we can use to confront that guy without drawing attention to us. He's gonna foolishly follow us and we are gonna turn the tables on him."

-Patrick: (seeing it) "And make him give us the location where they are keeping my sister."

-Sthandiwe: "I know it's a long shot and it might not work but we gotta try, hey. The guy is an amateur. I saw how he was watching you at the airport, and even how he's watching us now, he's being obvious. He's a fucking amateur. And we're gonna use that to our advantage."

-Patrick: "Okay, let's do this. I hope it works, hey."

He paid then they left. The guy followed them.

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Patrick drove and ended up on a quiet, narrow street between two abandoned buildings.

-Patrick: "These buildings are both abandoned. They were empty up until recently. Now they are illegally occupied by rough sleepers."

-Sthandiwe: "Rough sleepers?"

-Patrick: "Homeless people."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, is that what you call them up here? Anyway, that's no comfort to me. They have eyes too, you know. I don't want witnesses."

-Patrick: "They have eyes but they don't have phones. And they aren't exactly friends with the cops, if you get what I mean."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, drop me off here. Then drive around and when that guy has driven in, block his way out from behind with your car. We'll have him surrounded."

He nodded. She got off and he drove forward. She went to hide behind a dumpster. Shortly, she heard a car approaching, she got out from hiding with her gun behind her. And when she saw that it was really the car she had been waiting for, she drew her gun and pointed it to the driver while standing in the middle of the narrow street. The guy had no choice but to step on the brake before she could pull the trigger.

-Sthandiwe: "Get out of the car with your hands where I can see them."

The guy hesitated. Then opened the door and got out with his hands up in the air.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, New Mexico. What are you doing in the Irish land?"

-The Guy: "Who the fuck are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Call me Africa."

His response to that was a quick movement of his hand to the back of his waist, ready to pull out his weapon.

-Sthandiwe: "Uh, uh, uh, don't even think about it. I will plant a bullet in your skull before you can even put your finger on that trigger... Take your weapon out and throw it on the ground now. Slowly."

He did.

-Sthandiwe: "Now kick it over to me."

But he didn't. His time to listen to her was over. He sprinted behind his car and got a chance to pull out his second gun. He fired a shot in Sthandiwe's direction. She quickly dived and took cover behind that dumpster again. And the guy got a chance to make a run for it. But Patrick came with his car and blocked his way. The guy knew that he was screwed but he couldn't give up just like that. He fired three shots at Patrick's car. Patrick got down, giving the guy a chance to climb another dumpster and scale a fire escape. Sthandiwe got out from behind her dumpster and looked up as the guy fled. But she couldn't let him get away. She chased after him, passing the gun he had dropped on the ground and noticing that it was a Springfield XDm 9mm. She went to climb the dumpster the guy had climbed, and scaled the ladder. The guy fired two shots at her. She avoided them and continued climbing up.

-Sthandiwe: (under her breath) "You've already wasted 6 rounds, moron."

And her bet was that the weapon the guy was carrying was the same as the one he had just left on the street.

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By the time she climbed over the rail, the guy was already on the roof, and he was running to the other side. She took out her gun and ran after him. The guy stopped, turned around and fired a shot. She dived behind a ventilation system and took a deep breath.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, I don't think there's another way off this rooftop. Think smart."

The guy didn't respond to that, he just kept firing with his suppressor-fitted weapon, just hitting the ventilation system every time. Sthandiwe was lying flat on the ground counting his shots as she occasionally fired blind shots just so he wouldn't come close. When he reached 14 shots, she knew that he was out and she emerged from cover with her gun drawn. The guy clicked the trigger. CLICK, empty. He dropped his gun. Sthandiwe dropped hers too and raised her hands.

-Sthandiwe: "Look I'm unarmed. I don't wanna shoot you, I don't wanna hurt you, I just wanna talk."

The guy backed toward the edge. Sthandiwe approached him. He backed onto the edge and looked over his shoulder. Sthandiwe knew what that meant.

-Sthandiwe: "No, stop! Please don't do that. Don't jump."

Downstairs, Patrick was only starting to climb up the ladder. When he finally got to the rooftop, he found Sthandiwe standing alone away from the edge.

-Patrick: "What happened? Where's our guy?"

-Sthandiwe: "Down there."

Patrick went to look over the edge. He saw the guy lying in a heap at a distance from their tall building, in the street. His skull shattered and body broken. Patrick backed away from the edge, disgusted and looking like he was about to puke.

-Patrick: "What the fuck? The motherfucker jumped off? He killed himself? How are we going to get the info we wanted from him now that he's looking like Humpty fucking Dumpty?"

-Sthandiwe: "He committed suicide, you say? Now that's tragic. Guess we're gonna have to bring the IOC in on this one."

Patrick looked perplexed.

-Patrick: "The IOC? Is that a police force back in SA?"

-Sthandiwe: "C'mon, I'm talking about the International Olympic Committee."

-Patrick: (confused) "Huh?"

-Sthandiwe: "We're gonna have to see if they award gold medals posthumously, because this guy's just shattered the world record for the long jump. And judging from the position of the body he did it while running backwards."

-Patrick: (realising) "Shit, Tee. He didn't jump, you threw him off. Did you even get what we wanted from him before you did that?"

Sthandiwe just shrugged.

-Sthandiwe: "You've brought the old Sthandiwe back. Now deal with it. And let's get the hell out of here."

She said that already walking away. Patrick followed behind as they rushed out of there.

Insert #85

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"You can't trust even your own body. Just like any other thing or person, it can betray or fail you." -
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Patrick and Sthandiwe rushed downstairs to their car but before they could get in, Patrick went to pick up the gun that guy left on the ground. Then they got in the car and Patrick drove them out of there.

-Patrick: "What in the hell did you do that for, Tee? Why did you throw that guy off that rooftop? We haven't even started yet but you're already bringing us heat. Now we might not even find my sister. What the fuck were you thinking?"

-Sthandiwe: (calm) "I understand that you're stressed out about this whole thing with your sister but, dude, talk to me like that again and we're gonna have a problem."

He took a deep breath and apologised.

-Patrick: "Okay, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. But what happened up on that rooftop?"

-Sthandiwe: "That guy, his name was Kyle by the way, became stupid. That's what happened. I drop my weapon and I tell him that I don't wanna fight I just wanna talk. What does he do? He backs away toward the edge, onto the edge, and I'm sure he's about to jump. I beg him not to do it, and he listens. He walks away from the edge and comes straight to me. The next thing I know, he's releasing some kicks. Hell, I didn't spend years training in BB's basement and 3 months training in Okinawa to have my ass kicked by his skinny ass."

-Patrick: "And then what happened? How did he end up down there?"

-Sthandiwe: "You wouldn't be asking if you had gotten up to that rooftop in time. You would have witnessed everything. Where the hell were you?"

-Patrick: "I'm sorry about that, but climbing up with this leg was a bit of a challenge. It was acting up. So what happened? Did he tell you where they are keeping Alannah?"

-Sthandiwe: "With him dangling upside down over the edge, he had no choice but to tell me. He gave me the coordinates. And then he said something more. He said knowing the location don't mean shit, we won't get to her. That The Tiger will deal with us and I'll wish I didn't come to Ireland."

-Patrick: "You sure he said The Tiger?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't forget anything I hear with these ears or anything I see with these eyes of mine."

-Patrick: "Yeah?"

-Sthandiwe: "That's how I got straight As in school without spending hours and hours studying."

-Patrick: "It's nice to be you but not so nice now that you're here and The Tiger is here."

-Sthandiwe: "Who the hell is he?"

-Patrick: "James McElroy. He was Richard Moore's right hand man."

-Sthandiwe: "And Richard is the leader that you killed, right?"

-Patrick: "Yeah. And now that he's dead, James must be the leader. He shouldn't be handling these matters himself, he should be sending his men. But you say Kyle said he's here. Well, that means one thing and one thing only. He really wants me dead."

-Sthandiwe: "All his boys are here too. That's what Kyle said. I asked how many men are with The Tiger and he said all of them. I asked how many is that and he said..."

-Patrick: (finishing the sentence) "Six."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. How did you know that?"

-Patrick: "The gang had only 14 members. We killed 6 in Phoenix. You just killed 1. That leaves James and 6 more men."

-Sthandiwe: "We sure are outnumbered... But for the rec, I didn't wanna kill Kyle up on that rooftop. After he told me what I wanted to know I was gonna tie his hands together and come down with him alive but he became stupid again. He turned on me and tried to throw me off that rooftop. I got angry and reacted. It happened so fast, I even surprised myself. I don't know where I got the strength from but the next thing I knew he was down there. I had thrown his skinny bones off like a sack of potatoes."

-Patrick: "I don't like how it happened but he was gonna die in the end. So it doesn't really matter how or when it happened... Take my iPad from the back seat and type in the coordinates."

She took it and opened the Google Maps app. Then she typed in the coordinates. And when the pin showed up at her coordinates, she showed it to Patrick.

-Patrick: "Damn...Sligo? Rugged countryside. It's gonna take us about 2 and a half hours to get there."

-Sthandiwe: "Since there won't be no trade, we'll have to get there before they leave and come here for the trade at 17:30. And for them to make it here by 17:30 they will have to leave this Sligo place around 14:30. That means we have to be there before then. Which in turn means I won't get even an hour of sleep. It's just before 12:00 now and I haven't slept in more than 24 hours. Buddy, I'm exhausted. But it's cool, let's pass by a store and buy some energy drinks."

Patrick drove her to a store. She went in and bought 6 cans of energy drink and lots of energy bars. Then they drove to his apartment.

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They got to the apartment and Sthandiwe went to take a shower while Patrick got online to check out the property Alannah was being held at.

When she was done, Sthandiwe put on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers before wearing her bulletproof vest. After that, she put on a heavy sweater and a cap. Then she went to join Patrick in the lounge. She sat next to him on the couch and started downing her energy drinks.

-Sthandiwe: "Got something useful?"

-Patrick: "It's a listed rental property. A holiday cottage. For those who want a peaceful, quiet getaway in the genuine rural Ireland. It's completely secluded. Owner lives about 20 minutes away. The house itself is surrounded by trees and green farmland, and that could work in our favour. We can approach without being spotted."

But Sthandiwe just kept quiet, she didn't respond to any of that.

-Patrick: "Hey, are you even listening to me?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I'm just thinking. The last time I went on a mission like this, it was just me and KG. And we were going to rescue Chris...(she sighed) I can't say it was God because I know that God is against such behaviour, so I'll just say it was luck. It was luck that got us out of there alive. But I'm not sure if luck is gonna make it this time around. I hope you know that we might die out there."

Patrick sighed and rubbed his hands over his face.

-Patrick: "Yeah, I know. And I know that you're scared, believe me I'm scared too. But I want you to know that I'll die first before I let you die out there."

-Sthandiwe: "Or maybe dying is not such a bad idea, you know. Living is too hard. Life is too rough. And I..."

-Patrick: (interrupting) "Don't say it. You're not gonna die today. Not if I'm still alive. And you do have something to live for. Someone, actually. Chris. When we're out there, fight to stay alive so you could get back to him, okay?"

She nodded, with glassy eyes. The thought of dying without Chris was sinking in and it was terrifying her. But the thought of having Patrick and his sister, Alannah, killed by those guys was something she knew she would never be able to live with. She couldn't let it happen without at least trying to help prevent it.

-Patrick: "I'm glad you two are moving forward together, by the way. You and Chris. Life is too short to waste time denying your feelings."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. But who will you be fighting to get back to today? Rick, it's been 6 months since your wife passed away. You need to live again. Life is too short to live in the past."

-Patrick: "No. I'm still not ready to move on yet. But when I am, I'll let you know. Just like I'm expecting you to let me know when you finally set the wedding date."

-Sthandiwe: "Wedding date? Aren't you a little forward? Chris and I haven't even sat down and talked about our relationship and you're already thinking about the wedding? That might not even happen. Maybe he doesn't even want to marry me anymore. But I'm just glad that he still wanted me back and of course, I'm happy I got to decide to give him a second chance. The guy regrets what he did. And

hey, like I said to you back in Okinawa, I'm no saint either. I cheated on the guy but he forgave me. So who am I not to forgive him?"

-Patrick: "That wedding is gonna happen. And when it's approaching, make sure to call me, and I'll be there."

-Sthandiwe: "Right. But right now we gotta be in Sligo. So let's get going. But before we do. When you parked downstairs I saw a motorbike next to your spot and now I'm seeing a helmet in that corner. Is the bike yours?"

-Patrick: "Yeah. Borrowed it from a friend. Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "You take the car and I'll take the bike. That way if one of us gets tied up, if you get what I mean, another will make it. And we're not gonna take the rifles, they are only gonna draw attention to us, we'll be fine with just the handguns."

Patrick agreed. Sthandiwe took his backpack, put in two handguns, extra ammo, some clothes on top and her energy bars then slung it over her shoulders. Patrick put on his bulletproof vest under his jacket. Then grabbed his handgun and the one that belonged to Kyle and put them in another backpack. Then they walked out. When they got downstairs, Sthandiwe took the motorbike and Patrick took the car and they rode to Sligo, even though they weren't sure if they would make it back alive.

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They got there by 14:30. Their target house was a two-storey cottage far up a quiet gravel lane way. They had to ditch their wheels when they were halfway the gravel lane and be on foot. They could see the house at a distance.

-Patrick: "We are taking a risk here. We couldn't even do our homework. We don't know what's waiting for us up there."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll walk up straight to the house, to their front door, and create a distraction. And you'll jump over that stonewall into the farm yard right now. Then run that way, move from tree to tree until you make it to the side of the house. We'll meet at the front door. I'm sure you know what that means."

-Patrick: "You sure they won't be suspicious?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of what? Hey, I'm a black African. So what connection do I have to a Caucasian American?"

-Patrick: "Right. Let me get going then. From the online profile of the property, the house has 7 rooms, two of which are bedrooms and they are upstairs. I'm sure that's where they are keeping Alannah. Since you'll go in first, know where to go. Okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sure... We don't even know if the house is guarded or not. But if it is, you'll know what to do, right?"

-Patrick: "Yeah. Don't worry, my weapons and my martial arts skills will come in handy...But what if the coordinates Kyle gave us aren't correct? What if he lied?"

-Sthandiwe: "I doubt it. But I'll make sure it's the right house before I engage."

He pulled out his phone, a smartphone this time not the cheap phone he had in Japan, and showed Sthandiwe a photo on it.

-Patrick: "This is the photo of James aka The Tiger. If you see him in there you'll know that it's the right house."

She nodded.

-Patrick: "Thanks for doing this, Tee. Thanks for being here."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, if anything happens to me in that house, don't blame yourself. Okay? I know I won't. Even from beyond the grave."

Patrick just stared at her.

-Sthandiwe: "I mean it."

He just nodded and left. He jumped over the wall and made a run through the green farmland. Sthandiwe took both her guns out of the backpack and tucked them in the back of her waist and covered them with her sweater. Then walked to the house with her backpack on her back.

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Because Patrick was running he reached the side of the house before Sthandiwe could reach the front door. And luckily for them, the house wasn't guarded. He moved to the only window at that side of the house and peered in. It was a passage and no one was there. He dropped to his knees and maneuvered below the window-line, creeping across the side of the house. He reached the front corner and peeked around it. He saw Sthandiwe getting to the front door and she signalled for him to wait. Then she quickly pulled out one of her guns, cocked it and hid it behind her. Then she knocked, her nerves keening. One of the guys came to open.

-Guy: "Can I help you?"

American accent. That was a greenlight for Sthandiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. My car just broke down, down the road. And I don't know the first thing about cars, except driving them, of course. Can you maybe help me?"

The Guy: "Ummmh I don't know, but come on in."

She stepped inside. The hand holding the gun still behind her.

-Sthandiwe: "Please, help me. I have to be in Dublin with that car by this evening. I don't know what I'd do if it doesn't get fixed."

As she was talking her eyes were discreetly moving around, scanning the interior of the house. There was only one guy in the lounge, sitting in front of a fireplace. The passage was clear.

-The Guy: (to the guy in front of the fireplace) "Hey, Edgar, I gotta go check this lady's car. See how I can help her. But I'll be back soon."

-Edgar: "No, Spencer. The Tiger is gonna be here any minute from now. He better finds us here. You know that we gotta be at Knock Airport. We're flying to Dublin, remember?"

The Tiger. That was another greenlight for Sthandiwe. She sure was at the right place. And the gang was going to fly to Dublin which explained why they were still not ready to go.

-Spencer: (looking at Edgar) "I won't take too long. But if the boss gets here..."

But Sthandiwe didn't let him finish that sentence. In a blink of an eye she had gotten her gun pointed to him and its trigger pulled, taking him down. Edgar was now aware of what was happening and he tried to reach for his revolver on the table next to his couch. But he took a bullet to his temple before he could reach it. That's when Patrick charged in. Just as another guy came out of one of the doors opening to the passage, already shooting. But Patrick took him out. Then he took the passage while Sthandiwe ran up the stairs to get Alannah.

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But another guy walked out of the kitchen at the end of the passage with Alannah, pointing a gun to her head.

-The Guy: (to Patrick) "Drop your weapon or I will blow her head off."

Sthandiwe was in the middle of the stairs, out of sight, but she heard that and she knew what the situation was. But she continued upstairs anyway because she trusted Patrick to handle the situation. After all, there were possibly two more men upstairs that she had to deal with before they deal with them. She moved with stealth, gun held out and aimed, prepared to fire as she checked both bedrooms upstairs and the two bathrooms that were there. But they were all empty, there were no more men up there. So the remaining two men were obviously with The Tiger wherever he was. She decided to go back downstairs. She descended the steps slowly. One step at a time. Each foot-fall measured to deny noise. And her gun held out. But she stopped two steps before reaching the base of the stairs. She was still out of sight but she could hear that Patrick was still giving the guy a hard time. He still hadn't dropped his weapon. And Alannah was sobbing, scared.

-The Guy: "If you don't drop your weapon, you know that I can pull this trigger and shoot you first, right? Before shooting your sister."

-Patrick: "Except you won't do that because I have Kyle... Come to think of it, the guy looks just like you. He's your baby brother, isn't he?"

The guy blanched immediately, obviously terrified by the thought of that. But he tried to act tough.

-The Guy: "What? I don't believe you. You don't have my brother."

-Patrick: "Oh, yes I do. Kill me and you'll never know where he is."

-The Guy: "How do I know that you're not lying?"

-Patrick: "How do you think I got this location? I got it from him. And if you allow me to move my hand to reach my waist, I'll show you the gun I took from him before I tied his hands and feet to a steel chair in a location only known by me."

Sthandiwe was still standing there, listening. She could hear that Patrick was only buying them time. She had to do something. Before things could go south and before The Tiger and his two men get there. Because Edgar had mentioned that he'd be there at any minute. But what was she going to do? There was only one passage downstairs and it was the one Patrick, the guy and Alannah were standing in. The guy was standing at the end of it with Alannah, so there was no way of getting behind him to take him out. But an idea hit her faster than she thought.

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She went back upstairs and to the master bedroom. She opened its window and looked outside, down at the ground she was going to land on. There were no obstructions and it wasn't far below. She took a deep breath then climbed up on the window and jumped out, with her backpack still on her back. She landed on her feet then ran to the side of the house - the same side Patrick was on. She reached the passage window and peered into the passage. She was seeing the back of the guy, he was facing away from the window and Patrick was facing towards it. He still had his gun drawn and he had shown the guy Kyle's gun. And the guy was buying his story, that he had Kyle, not knowing that Kyle was actually lying in one of Dublin's streets with crushed bones.

Patrick saw Sthandiwe outside the window and he saw it as a good time for him to finally drop his weapon. He lowered it and dropped it. The Guy gestured for him to kick it over to him and he did. When the guy bent over to pick it up, Patrick nodded to Sthandiwe, a way of telling her to get ready to fire. And the moment the guy rose up, Sthandiwe took the shot, right to the back of his head. And he went down to join his buddies in the land of the dead. Patrick rushed to his sister and untied her hands.

Outside, Sthandiwe was seeing a car approaching the house from another direction, not the one they had approached from. She ran around the corner to the front door. She got in and saw the siblings in each other's arms.

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, I love this. Happy reunion. It's really nice but we don't have time for it right now. There's a car approaching. It's probably The Tiger and two of his boys."

Patrick and Alannah broke off the hug. Alannah, 25, looked at Sthandiwe, wondering who she was. But just then they heard the car arriving outside.

-Sthandiwe: (speaking fast) "Hey, Alannah. Nice to meet you but you gotta move your ass, right now. To the back door."

Patrick picked up his guns then they all rushed to the kitchen and got out the back door.

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They got out the back of the house and made a run for it, Patrick running behind. But the lone guy that had just arrived in that car could see them. He jumped out of the car with his gun drawn and he didn't hesitate, he fired at them. Patrick and Sthandiwe both turned around at the same time, shooting. The guy took cover around the corner of the house.

-Sthandiwe: (quickly) "Alannah, run and take cover behind that timber shed."

Alannah did just that, she ran for her dear life to hide behind the timber shed that was at a short distance from the rear of the house.

Sthandiwe and Patrick were shooting as they ran backwards, also wanting to get behind the timber shed for cover. The guy would emerge from around the corner, take shots at them then take cover again. But when he was emerging for the fourth time, Patrick's bullet made his chest its home and he went down, but not before his own bullet caught Patrick's hip and he dropped down to his knees.

-Sthandiwe: (frantic) "Rick? Rick, are you okay? Are you okay?"

She said that already dropping her gun and going to him to check if he was okay. Alannah heard that and got out from behind the shed running, also wanting to see if her brother was okay.

Patrick was still on his knees. But he wasn't bleeding. His eyes moved to where the bullet had hit him. And he could see the slug lodged through the front pocket of his jeans. He tucked his hand in his pocket and he could feel that the bullet was lodged to the double Eye of Ra discs made of hard copper that he got from Sthandiwe. He pulled the slug out then took the discs out and held them out for the girls to see.

-Patrick: "To keep me safe and protect me, right?"

The girls both smiled, relieved.

-Sthandiwe: "They literally protected you, hey."

Alannah just couldn't resist pulling her brother into an embrace.

-Alannah: "I'm glad you're okay, bro."

-Patrick: "That makes the two of us. Now let's get outta here."

-Sthandiwe: "Let's use the guy's car. That way we'll get to our own wheels quicker, before the others get here."

With no disputes, they all rushed to the car and found the key still in the ignition. They got in and got out of there, Sthandiwe driving.

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On the way, Patrick briefly introduced the two ladies then apologised to his sister.

-Patrick: "I'm sorry you had to go through this because of me, Lana. My precious job got us into this. First I put Lucy's life in danger, and I lost her. Now I almost you. I'm so sorry."

Alannah held his hand.

-Alannah: "Please don't do that. Don't blame yourself, Patrick. You didn't know this was gonna happen, you were just doing your job. I just want to thank you for coming to rescue me. And I want you to know that I still love you, you're still my brother."

They were both sitting in the back seat. Sthandiwe didn't want to interfere, she let the siblings talk. She just looked at them in the rear view mirror, admiring the brother-sister relationship they had.

In no time they got to where they had left their wheels. They parked the car and got out.

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, guys, take Patrick's car and I'll take my bike."

-Patrick: (to Alannah) "Sis, take the steering wheel. Here, you're a better driver than me."

-Alannah: "Okay. (to Sthandiwe) Thank you for coming to help my brother. Thank you for coming to save me... We haven't exactly got acquainted yet but I'm sure we'll..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "We'll get to that, dear. But when we're back in Dublin. Right now we gotta get out of here."

-Alannah: "Right."

-Patrick: "Thanks once again, Tee. For everything."

She nodded.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Alannah. On the way don't stop for anything but the traffic officers, or whatever y'all call them up here. Okay? I'll be right behind you, guys."

Alannah nodded and got in the car. Patrick followed suit and they drove off.

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Sthandiwe put her guns in her backpack, got on the motorbike and put on the helmet. But when she was about to start it, she felt light-headed. She tried to ignore that and tried to start the bike. But her

hands were now shaking, she couldn't even turn the key. Her vision went fuzzy in a second and her whole body began to shake. She was dizzy. She got off the bike before she could fall off of it, and sat down on the ground. Alannah and Patrick were already far and she couldn't call them to come back because she had no cell phone.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit. What's happening to me? Why is my body failing me, now of all times?"

Her body was really failing her. She laid flat on the ground as she was getting weaker and weaker. What frustrated her even more was that she didn't even know what was happening to her. She remembered her energy bars in her backpack. She took it off her back and got the bars out. She devoured them in desperation, eyes closed. By the time she finished the fourth one, she was already feeling the difference. She could hear a car approaching. To her it sounded like it was still far, but in reality it was already getting to where she was. She opened her eyes and got to her hands and knees, trying to get up. But a vicious kick in the ribs lifted her off the ground, rolling her away from her backpack that had her guns. She looked up and it was The Tiger himself.

-The Tiger: "You bastard! You thought you could kill my boys and get away with it?"

He angrily punted her again. Adding a boot in the face this time. And she was too weak to fight back. She tried to get up. But The Tiger's remaining man slammed the butt of a gun against her skull. She dropped back to the ground, hard. The man reversed the gun and pointed it at her head, about to pull the trigger. But The Tiger stopped him.

-The Tiger: "No, not yet. She still needs to tell us where those Doyle monkeys are. Get her in the car."

The man aggressively dragged her across the ground to the car.

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Along the way, Patrick noticed that Sthandiwe was nowhere to be seen in the rear view mirror.

-Patrick: "Something's wrong."

-Alannah: "Huh?"

-Patrick: "Tee is not riding behind us. Pull over."

-Alannah: "But she said I shouldn't stop for anything."

-Patrick: "I heard what she said, I was there. But I also heard her say she'll be right behind us but she's not. I'm not gonna argue with you, Alannah. Turn around, NOW."

-Alannah: "Fine. Fine. I'm going back."

She made a U-turn and drove back.

But when they got to where they had left her, she was gone. The car they had taken from the cottage was gone too. But her motorbike was still there, key in the ignition. And they could see the trail where she had been dragged.

-Patrick: "She's been taken?"

-Alannah: "What?"

-Patrick: "Can't you see? James was here, that's for sure. They took their car AND her. Check the bike, key's still on. And look at this trail. She's been taken by force. Only one person would do that. James."

-Alannah: "Oh no, Patrick. What do we do now? She helped you save me and now she's the one taken. Oh no. Oh no."

She said that pacing back and forth, anxious, panicked.

-Patrick: "Get back in the car. We need to get out of here, now."

-Alannah: "No. We can't leave without her. We gotta go back to the cottage. Maybe they are still there with her."

-Patrick: "The cottage, huh? Have you looked up there?"

She looked and there were police cars outside. Obviously someone heard the gunshots and called them. She freaked out.

-Alannah: "Gardaí? [Police?] Shit. Yeah, yeah, let's go."

She said that already hurrying back inside the car. Patrick climbed on the motorbike. And they both drove out of there.

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They didn't drive to Patrick's apartment, they drove to one of the hotels in Dublin City Centre and got themselves a room. Because they didn't trust the apartment to be safe from James.

Patrick sat down on the couch in their room pondering his next move. While Alannah paced around the room, panicking.

-Patrick: "Could you please stop doing that? I'm trying to think here."

-Alannah: "If something happens to her I won't be able to live with myself, Patrick. She came here to help you save me. We got her into this... Oh gosh, she could be dead already."

-Patrick: "No, she's not. She's still alive, Lana. She is."

-Alannah: "How can you be sure? They are members of a gang, Patrick. Killing people is what they do."

-Patrick: "Did they kill you? Alannah, those guys don't want Tee dead, they don't even know her. The person they want is me. They took her to get to me, just like they took you. I know they'll make contact, demanding me to hand myself over to them and they'd release her. But I won't do that. I'm gonna get Tee back my own way... I know that woman is strong and resourceful. And I know that wherever she is she's holding on. Holding on because she knows that I'm gonna get to her. I promised her that I won't let those guys do anything to her as long as I'm still alive. And I intend to keep that promise."

-Alannah: "But how are you gonna get her back working alone? You couldn't do it for me, that's why you called her. So now that it's her in the hole, who are you gonna call?"

-Patrick: "That's what I'm still trying to figure out. And I will if you could just shut up and let me think. It's not like you can help me with this."

-Alannah: "Yeah, I know that I can't help but maybe our cousin can."

-Patrick: "Who? Jake?"

-Alannah: "Yeah."

-Patrick: "Alannah, Jake is a garda [police.] He's one of the good guys. He can't be involved in this kind of stuff."

-Alannah: "I know, Patrick. But maybe he'll help if you tell him what the situation is."

-Patrick: "No, he won't. He wouldn't help me when it was you who was abducted and he won't help me now. Why do you think I called Tee? He wouldn't help me as my cousin or as a cop...(pointing) Please pass me my phone."

Alannah took the phone on the table and handed it to him.

-Alannah: "You gonna call him?"

-Patrick: "No, I'm calling Chris."

-Alannah: "Chris? Who's Chris?"

-Patrick: "Tee's boyfriend. Fiancé. I have his number on my phone because when Tee got here she borrowed it to call him. I think he can help me with this."

-Alannah: "Okay let me get this straight. You wanna call this guy and tell him that his fiancée just got abducted because of you, then expect him to work with you? You think that's gonna happen?"

-Patrick: "Okay, what do you want me to do, Alannah? Huh? What do you want me to do?"

-Alannah: "I want you to call Jake, Patrick. Just call him and ask him to come here, I'll talk to him myself."

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Patrick ended up calling Jake and he came almost immediately because his place wasn't that far. Patrick and Alannah told him everything and that they needed his help.

-Patrick: "I have to get her back, cuz. I have to. You understand, right? I asked this woman to leave the comfort of her own country and come here to help me. So now that she's in trouble I gotta get her out. I gotta see to it that she gets back home safe and sound. So please, help me."

-Jake: "This is Ireland. My country. We have strict gun laws here because we're trying to keep our country safe. But no, y'all had to bring your war here. With guns. I don't like this."

-Alannah: "Jake, could you please stop being a goddam garda for a moment? We called you here as our cousin. And we really need your help. No Irish will get hurt in this whole thing, Jake. Just please help us."

Jake sighed.

-Jake: "Okay, fine. I'll help you. Where do you say this happened?"

-Patrick: "Sligo. About 25 minutes out of Sligo town. Close to Tubbercurry."

-Jake: "So is the area covered by Garda Station [Police Station] in Sligo town or in Tubbercurry?"

-Patrick: "I wouldn't know. It's not like we could approach the gardaí at the scene and ask what station they were from."

-Jake: "Fine. I have contacts in Tubbercurry Garda Station and in Sligo town. I'll call them and ask about the evidence collected from the cottage. Maybe we'll get a lead, then take it from there."

-Patrick: "Thank you."

But it was already late that day. So they slept and Jake was going to make the calls the following day.

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The next day, Sthandiwe came to. She opened her eyes, but her vision was blurry. She closed them and opened them again. And when she did, there was no more blurriness, her vision was clear. But she was still disorientated, not knowing where she was or how she got there. She looked around and noticed that she was cuffed to a bed with a metal frame in a dark and dank room with no windows. But a bare overhead bulb provided some light. The walls and the floor of the room were excavated. And the door looked heavy, made of steel. Everything made her remember. She remembered what

had happened with The Tiger and it shook her to the core. The whole thing felt like dejavu. Only this time she was hooked up to an IV and her whole body was very painful from being kicked. But the physical aches were nothing compared to the anguish she felt for being failed by her own body.

Her hands were not tied, only the legs were. So she sat up and tried to take the IV off. But the door unlocked and opened. Daylight streamed in from above as a man wearing a white coat walked in. He looked at her.

-The Man: "Someone is finally awake. But I wouldn't take that off if I were you."

But Sthandiwe didn't listen to him. She took the IV off of her arm.

-Sthandiwe: "Who are you?"

-The Man: "Just call me Doctor. You weren't okay so I had to take care of you. Still have to."

-Sthandiwe: "Where am I? And how long have I been out for?"

-The Doctor: "It's after 16:00 now. And you've been out since yesterday around this time."

-Sthandiwe: "I've been out for 24 hours? What did you give me?"

-The Doctor: "Like I said, you weren't okay. So I gave you something to help your body relax and recuperate."

-Sthandiwe: "The Americans, I mean James and the other guy, are the ones that brought me here?"

That question made the Doctor uncomfortable.

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know Irish people, this is my first time in Ireland. But from listening to the woman I talked to at the airport, customs, and the waitress and patrons at the restaurant I went to, I can safely say I now can recognise Irish accent. All this bullshit to say I know that you're Irish. So what are you doing with those American thugs?"

The Doctor was increasingly becoming uncomfortable.

-The Doctor: "You better keep your mouth shut and only speak when you're asked a question."

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Just then the door unlocked and opened again. James aka The Tiger walked in with his remaining guy. They moved to the middle of the room and looked at Sthandiwe. She just stared back at them. The Doctor hurried to the door and walked out as if he was scared of being in the same room as those men.

James had Sthandiwe's passport in his hand. A passport that she had in the zipped pocket of her sweater when they kidnapped her the day before. He opened it and read her name out loud.

-James: "Stha-ndi-we Blie."

He read it as weirdly as an American can.

Sthandiwe didn't say anything. She just stared at him.

-James: "South African passport... I checked you out, you know. Thanks to the internet. And I got to learn that you're a lecturer at the University of Johannesburg. So..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "Whatever info you got of me is clearly outdated. I'm no longer a lecturer."

-James: "It doesn't matter. Just tell me, Doctor Blie, what are you doing here? What's your connection to the Doyles?"

She just stared at him, not saying a word.

-James: "I'm gonna ask you again. How do you know Patrick Doyle?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not answering because I don't know who you're talking about. Hell, I don't know even know who you are or why I'm here."

-James: "Please don't embarrass yourself by playing dumb. (to his guy) Eli, show her."

The guy tapped on the tablet that he was carrying then after some time he turned it to her. She watched. A surveillance footage of her and Patrick at the rear of the cottage, running and shooting.

-James: "That's a movie starring you and Patrick Doyle. The same person you just said you don't know."

Sthandiwe looked down. Fucked.

-James: "Just because my boys at that cottage didn't bother to check the surveillance computer more frequently it doesn't mean it wasn't there... Now seeing that you didn't want to answer my first question, I'm gonna ask a new one. Where are the Doyles?"

Sthandiwe didn't answer. She just continued looking down. Thinking about what to do or say next.

-James: "You still don't wanna answer? Okay, now I'm gonna have to hurt you."

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Guys, how many "Dangerous Love" family members are from the Eastern Cape? Everybody, please comment with your home town.

James came closer to Sthandiwe.

-James: "I see in your passport that you were in Okinawa until 4 days ago. I'm assuming that's where Patrick was hiding too, and that's where you two met... Now I'm gonna ask you one more time. Where's he?"

The way things were, she couldn't deny anything anymore.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm here with you, aren't I? So how am I supposed to know where he is?"

-James: "Oh, you're trying to be a smart ass."

He gave her a hot, deafening slap across the face. But she saw it coming, hence she didn't even move or scream. She just flinched and took it. It sure hurt but she couldn't entertain the pain. Not if she didn't want to give him some satisfaction.

-James: "Where's he?"

-Sthandiwe: "Why do you need me to tell you his location? Why don't you use me to draw him out of his hole? Why don't you contact him and tell him that you have me and you want a trade, just like you did with his sister? He would not let you keep me, he'll come to you for the trade."

-James: (sarcastic) "Oh, wow. Why didn't we think of that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh so you thought of it. Good, now you can stop wasting your time with me."

The other guy, Eli, decided to speak.

-Eli: "Unlike his sister, you're not innocent in all of this. So no, we don't want no trade. We want you here just as we want him. Besides, we can't contact him and tell him about a fuckin' trade if we don't have his number now, can we?"

-Sthandiwe: "How did you do it the last time?"

-Eli: "We found the house his family was hiding in. We got in and took the girl when the parents were sleeping. Because contrary to whatever you may be thinking, we don't wanna hurt his family, we just want him and only him. So two days after we had gotten the girl, we called that same house to give out our demands. And guess what? Just like we had thought, the person we wanted, their son, was now with them. But we can't use that same method again because now they're no longer at that house, they've evacuated. We don't know where they are and of course, we don't know where their son is shacking up either."

Sthandiwe chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "And the guy that you sent to tail him is dead too so I'm your only gate to him. But guess what? That gate is closed too."

-James: "What was that?"

-Sthandiwe: "You heard me. I'm not telling you anything. I don't know where Patrick is, but even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. I mean what's the use? Even if I tell you, you're gonna hurt me then kill me anyway. So go ahead, do it. I'm not telling you anything. You're not gonna win."

By saying that, she just asked for some serious beating. James released punches like rain, taking her apart. She couldn't do anything but tense and take them all. By the time he was done, she was spitting blood, coughing, and her body hurt like hell. Being punched on an already aching body, a body that was kicked multiple times the day before, was like being run over by a car. But she couldn't cry. She had to be strong and endure the pain. You'd be surprised at how much pain your body can take when you know that you don't have any other choice but to endure it.

-James: "You still don't wanna tell me what I wanna know?"

-Sthandiwe: "I told you, I won't. Being the kind of man that you are, doing what you do, I'm sure you've been on this side of the interrogation line before. Prolly several times. But I'm sure you never gave up anything. Well, you're not getting anything out of me either. Do what you wanna do, I ain't talking."

-James: "You have no idea what I'm gonna do to you."

-Sthandiwe: "You call yourself The Tiger, because you think you're fast, scary and dangerous, right? But you're not, not to me. To me you're just James. You know it as well, you are just a mobster wannabe. A low level gangster. A pathetic drug lord. That's all you're and you'll die as just that. If you wanted to have some real street power and everything that comes with it, you should have crossed the border to Mexico a long time ago, to join a real cartel. And stop being this pathetic."

And she had to pay for that. James gave her several stinging slaps, before deciding to up his game.

-James: "Eli, bring that long chain."

An ominous chill ran up her spine. 'Long chain? Shit! What is he going to do to me?' Those were her thoughts. And contrary to what she said, she was scared. Really scared. Eli went out to get the chain.

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He came back with it. They freed her legs from the bed and went to chain her hands up to one of the overhead exposed beams on the ceiling.

Then James landed blow after blow on her face. Not giving a shit that she was a woman. His punches were real punches, unlike René's. He panelbeated her face until she bled.

-James: (stepping back) "You know that you're gonna die here, right?"

-Sthandiwe: (crying) "Please. Do me that one favour. Just kill me already. Please. I've been through enough in my life and now I'm tired. I'm tired of living. What am I living for? Who am I living for? I lost both my parents. I have no family. And my friends? Well, I love them, I do, but lately they ain't loyal. Their actions are so cliché. When days are dark they run for the hills. They turn their backs on me. So

does my boyfriend. So really, I have nothing to live for. Go ahead, kill me and bury me right here, in this foreign land. I've done a lot of horrible things in my life, so maybe dying and being buried in a shallow, unmarked grave like a dog is what I deserve."

Both men were standing in front of her, staring at her. And their look said they were believing what she was saying. How could they not? Obviously they could see it in her eyes that she was telling the truth, because she really was. She meant every word. She was giving up. She wanted to die. The current physical pain and the emotional pain from the past was just too much.

-James: (with a smirk) "Oh, I am going to grant you your wish alright. I am gonna kill you. But before I do that you're gonna feel so much pain. You're gonna wish our paths never crossed... This is for my men, the men that you and Patrick killed. And you're gonna tell me where Patrick is. Then when I'm ready for you to die, I'm gonna kill you. Bitch, nobody kills my men and live."

She chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "You know what's funny? Is that you're doing this for your men's honour but truth is they had none. But no one knows that better than you, because you don't have it either."

By saying that she only poured gasoline onto the fire. The two men made her pay for the insult. They both kicked and punched her, beating the living shit out of her. Then they freed her from the chain and threw her on the floor. They kicked her like a dog and left her unconscious on the dirty floor.

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Back in Dublin. It was now in the evening and Patrick was tired of waiting for his cousin, Jake, to come and tell him about the outcome of the calls he had promised to make. So he went to his apartment to ask him. He found him home and he let him in.

-Jake: "Hey, cuz. You look like hell."

-Patrick: "How am I supposed to look? Huh? This is the second night that Tee is gonna spend out there. Last night you told me that you were gonna make some calls this morning but you haven't told me anything since then. What's happening?"

-Jake: "I did make the calls this morning. And the guy from Tubbercurry Garda Station told me that no kind of evidence was found at the scene. No evidence leading to you or the guys that have Tee. And they couldn't get anything about those guys from the owner of the cottage because every document they used is fake."

-Patrick: (annoyed) "Jake, Jake, please. Just get to the point already. Do you have any lead? Do you know where those guys are?"

-Jake: "That's no way to talk to the person who's trying to help you, Patrick."

-Patrick: "Okay, I'm sorry. It's just that...I'm losing my mind here."

-Jake: "Chill, I have a lead. I drove to Sligo County. I went to the cottage myself, alone. It's still a crime scene and no one was there. But who was gonna ask me anything anyway? I am a garda. Anyway, I looked around and I found something. I found two hidden surveillance cameras on the exterior of the cottage. But I didn't remove them, I went to talk to the landlord instead. The cameras were too concealed to have been put there by her. And just like I had thought, she told me they weren't hers. So I got an IT guy, who's a friend of mine, to help me. He discreetly checked the cameras out and they were still transmitting, still are, to an off-site location. He told me he could back-trace the signal to the people that have Tee. After all, the cameras are theirs. That way, we'll find her location."

-Patrick: "And what has your guy found?"

-Jake: "Nothing yet. The transmitter on the cams is encrypted with multiple relays."

-Patrick: "Can he source the transmission or not?"

-Jake: "He's trying to come up with a work around as we speak."

-Patrick: "So he still can't source the transmission. He still doesn't know where Tee is."

-Jake: "He's working on it, Patrick. He's doing everything he can."

-Patrick: (panicking) "Is there no other lead? No other way to find her?"

-Jake: "This is a good lead, Patrick. And it's all we have. My guy is good, he's gonna get the location. Let's just wait. When he's found something, he'll call me."

-Patrick: "Wait? Wait? Jake, it is the waiting that's killing me. Tee came here because of me. If something happens to her I would never forgive myself. Never."

-Jake: "Nothing's gonna happen. Just go and try to sleep, okay? I'll call you as soon as my guy calls me with something concrete."

Patrick's heart was heavy but he had no choice but to go back to his hotel room and try to sleep. It sure was going to be a long night.

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In the North Western side of the country, Sthandiwe was still in the bunker. She opened her eyes, but it was a blur. She couldn't see a thing. She blinked several times and the blur became a hazy glimpse of the Doctor. He was sitting on the bed nursing her wounds. She was in a fog from the beating, but eventually she fully came to and her vision became clear. She tried to get up.

-The Doctor: "Lie still. You're gonna be okay."

-Sthandiwe: "Why nurse me? I'm gonna die anyway."

-The Doctor: "I'm only doing my job. And that is to keep you alive until they kill you when they are ready."

Sthandiwe kept quiet, she hated that she was still alive to take the torture.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Doc, can you give me something that would make me sleep and never wake up? Like ever."

-The Doctor: "No. Giving you that is not my job. I'm only doing exactly what I'm told to do."

-Sthandiwe: "I see... When you first saw me, which was yesterday, I was out, right?"

-The Doctor: "You were awake but barely there. Then you slipped into unconsciousness again."

-Sthandiwe: "I remember experiencing vertigo before these guys got to me and knocked me unconscious. So what was wrong with me?"

-The Doctor: "Both your blood sugar and blood pressure were extremely low."

-Sthandiwe: "And what caused that? I was fine one minute, the next I was sick."

-The Doctor: "A number of things could have caused that. To be properly diagnosed you need to have tests done at a hospital, I can't help you with that."

-Sthandiwe: "But I can't go to a hospital now, can I? Hell, I won't even get out of here alive so I don't even know why I care. I'm gonna die here."

The Doctor looked at her. His look said he understands her pain because he's feeling it too.

-Sthandiwe: "Tell me, Doc. Why are you doing this job for these people? I can see that you don't wanna be here, you don't wanna do this. So why are you doing it?"

But she only made him uncomfortable with that. He stopped what he was doing, which was dressing her face wounds, and got up. But he was already finishing anyway.

-The Doctor: "Please, don't ask me questions like that. Just make sure you eat your food and...(he whispered) take these tablets, they'll help you with the pain. I'm not supposed to be giving them to you but I can see that you need them."

She nodded and mouthed 'thanks'. And the Doctor walked out of there as soon as he could.

Sthandiwe took the food and ate, at least they were giving her some. Then she swallowed the two pills she wasn't supposed to get. And they knocked her out almost immediately. Better than to stay awake all night because of the pain.

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The next day, Friday morning, Jake went to Patrick's hotel room with some good news, his guy had found the location the cams were transmitting to.

-Patrick: "This is great. This is where they are and I'm sure it's also where they are keeping Tee. We gotta go get her now."

-Jake: "We? No, Patrick, there's no 'we'. I can't go. I'm still a garda, you know. I can't go around shooting people as a civilian. And we can't bring cops into this because we'd only be getting you and Tee in trouble. So you gonna have to do this alone, cuz, I'm sorry. I've already done a lot of law-breaking, I can't do more. I've destroyed the surveillance footage showing your car leaving the alley between the two buildings where a guy got thrown off the roof-top to his death. And I went to Sligo and entered a crime scene I had no business being. And tempered with evidence in an ongoing murder investigation just to help my cousin. I've committed punishable crime, Patrick."

-Patrick: "Yeah, yeah, I get it. You can go, I'll do this myself."

-Jake: "But, cuz, what if you get killed out there?"

-Patrick: "I still have to do this. I have to clean up my mess."

-Jake: "Just be careful, okay?"

Patrick just nodded. And after Jake left, he got his gun, went to his car and drove off - back to Sligo County, in Ballintogher, where he believed Sthandiwe was being held.

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In the bunker, Sthandiwe was awake and her hands tied up to the overhead beam again. And the beating and torture session was on all over again. What was going through her mind all that time was the promises she had made. They kept echoing in her head. What she said to Sihle, "I won't miss your vow renewal ceremony for anything, chomi." And what she said to Chris, "Everything's gonna be fine, I promise. I'll come back to you in one piece." She had made promises and now she wasn't going to keep them. She was going to die far away from the people she had made them to. And that hurt more than the beatings.

The two men beat the living shit out of her until she passed out.

-Eli: "Is it just me or does she look dead?"

-James: "No, it's too early for her to die."

He slapped her, trying to bring her back. But she didn't. He shook her vigorously but she still didn't wake up.

-James: "Bring the doctor in here now, Eli."

Eli rushed out and came back with the Doctor. The Doctor felt the pulse on her neck using his finger. Then used his stethoscope on her chest.

-The Doctor: "She's not breathing. The pulse is fading and the heartbeat is slowing down dramatically. Untie her now."

Eli untied her and put her on the floor. The Doctor performed CPR on her but still, she wasn't waking up.

-The Doctor: "This isn't working. We're losing her."

James drew out his gun and pointed it to the Doctor.

-James: "You better make sure she stays alive. Hear me?"

-The Doctor: (scared) "Okay, okay. I have adrenaline shots in my bag upstairs. Eli, could you please go get them?"

Eli rushed out.

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The Doctor stopped the CPR. Sthandiwe's eyes snapped open. The Doctor didn't get surprised because he knew that she wasn't dying, he was just playing along, helping her. James didn't notice anything until Sthandiwe sprung up. The Doctor ran and went to hide around the bed, knowing very well that it was about to go down. As James was still surprised by the fact that Sthandiwe was awake, she threw a mean kick at his hand that was holding the gun and it fell off his grip and landed at a distance. James stumbled backwards, but immediately came back and felled her with a choppy-looking karate combination. He was no Jet-Li - his style was a throwback, even ugly, but it was well-practiced and brutally effective. Even still, Sthandiwe sprang back up. And came up swinging. The will to survive had taken over. She was no longer even feeling the pain that had made her body its friend. All she wanted was to get out of there alive so she could go back home. And she was going to fight with everything she had to make sure that happened.

James had no idea that she was a mean fighter. But she is. Combining karate, Krav Maga and kobudo (the weapon systems of Okinawan martial arts). If she can touch you, you're in trouble.

A vicious front kick from her folded James, and a fist drove him to the floor. But he spun back up and caught her with a kick. That kick really hurt her and it dropped her to the floor.

-James: "Bitch, who do you think I am? Don't waste your time fighting, you're gonna die here."

He wanted to pique her. But he was only pouring gasoline onto the fire. She exploded off the ground. The suddenness and fury of the rush caught James off guard. She drove him backward and slammed him against the wall. Then hooked an arm around the back of his neck and drove the other fist like a piston into his abdomen. All her weight behind her punches. And the speed of the punches rose like a drum solo, destroying his midsection. She swore she felt a rib crack. And she wanted to break some more and crush them into his heart but she had no time. Eli was going to walk in at any minute. So she dropped him down on the floor and back-spinned to get the gun. She grabbed it and cocked it. But before pulling the trigger she had to say something.

-Sthandiwe: "Look who's gonna die now."

-James: (trying to get up) "Bitch, you..."

He didn't finish that sentence. Sthandiwe pulled the trigger and painted the floor with his brains.

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Eli was already descending the stairs to the basement when he heard the gunshot. And he knew that something was wrong because he hadn't even gotten the adrenaline from the Doctor's bag. He rushed down and opened the door with his gun already drawn. But Sthandiwe was waiting and ready for him, behind the door. And immediately when he stepped inside, she took the non-fatal shot, to his arm that had the gun. The gun fell and that shot was immediately followed by another to his back. He dropped to the floor and Sthandiwe walked over to him and kicked him over. He was still alive and she had to finish him off but the Doctor screamed asking her to not kill him.

-Sthandiwe: "Not kill him? Why?"

-The Doctor: "You were right, I didn't wanna work for them. Hell, I don't even know them. But what I know is that they have my wife. They wanted a doctor around here to do this work for them and I guess through their online search I became their lucky pick. They came to the hospital where I work and told me to come with them or my wife will die. So if you kill him I won't know where my wife is."

-Sthandiwe: "Are you sure they have her?"

-The Doctor: "They made me talk to her on the phone before we left the hospital. And she sounded so scared."

-Sthandiwe: "You're saying 'they'. Does that mean they both came to the hospital?"

-The Doctor: "Yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Then that means there's a third man out there guarding your wife. Probably the same man that hooked them up with this place. (to Eli) Where's his wife? Where's your man holding her? Tell me what I wanna know and I will let you live. I will let you go to the hospital."

Eli just smirked.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, you think this is funny?"

She stepped on the gunshot wound on his shoulder and pressed it down. He screamed in pain.

-Sthandiwe: "Where's she?"

-Eli: "Okay. Okay. I'll tell you."

He told her what she wanted to know. But she didn't keep her promise, she didn't spare his life.

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks."

That word was quickly followed by trigger pulling, and the bullet went through his head, in between his eyes.

-Sthandiwe: "Doc, thanks for helping me and you'll get your wife back. Now let's get outta here. But first, do you know where my backpack is?"

-The Doctor: "Upstairs. It's upstairs."

But to make sure, she went to search James' pockets for her passport. And indeed it was still in his pocket, not in her backpack. She took it out and they got out of the room.

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But as they were ascending the stairs they could hear some footsteps upstairs. Sthandiwe gestured for the Doctor to go back downstairs and she proceeded upstairs with stealth, gun drawn. She finished the stairs and when she turned a corner, she was met by a gun pointed at her. A two second long Mexican stand-off between two friends.

-Sthandiwe: (lowering her gun) "Rick?"

-Patrick: (lowering his) "Tee. You don't look so good. Are you okay?"

Insert #88 (Unedited)

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Home Sweet Home!!!

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-Sthandiwe: "I'll live."

-Patrick: "All clear?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I took them both out."

He gave her a hug, happy that she was alive. But Sthandiwe had to cut the hug short, he was hurting her with that squeeze.

-Sthandiwe: (pushing him away) "Dude, you're killing me."

-Patrick: "Sorry. I'm just glad you're alive."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, you and me both. And I'm glad you came. I wasn't gonna know what to do when I walk out of here. I'm sure you are no longer at the apartment so I wasn't gonna know how to find you, because I don't even know your phone number... How did you find me anyway?"

He gave her the short version.

-Sthandiwe: "Well, Jake did great then. I gotta thank him. But first we need to get out of here."

-Patrick: "Speaking of, there was an extra guy pulling up at the front of the cottage when I was approaching. He sure was gonna take you out as soon as you stepped out of this house. But I took care of him. The moron shot at me first. But I'm sure you didn't hear anything in here because both our guns are silenced."

-Sthandiwe: "An extra man? Now I wonder how many Irish men were working for James."

-Patrick: "What do you mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "There's another Irish man here that he forced to work for him."

She called the Doctor to come up and he did.

-Sthandiwe: "Doc, this is my friend Patrick and he's gonna help you get your wife back. (to Patrick) Rick, I'm alive because this man helped me. James abducted his wife so he would do a job for him. Now I want you to get his wife back. I have the address, so let's get moving."

-The Doctor: "No, not yet. I can't just leave knowing that my fingerprints are all over this murder scene. I have to wipe them off first."

He had a point. All three of them wiped all the surfaces and door knobs in the house. Then Sthandiwe took what belonged to her - her backpack and bulletproof vest. Then they walked out of the house, which was also an isolated holiday cottage.

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They walked out and saw the body of the man Patrick was talking about. Sthandiwe searched his pockets and found his driver's licence.

-Sthandiwe: "Confirmed, he was Irish."

-Patrick: "Except he didn't seem like someone who was being forced to do this, unlike Doc here."

-Sthandiwe: "And I think he was the owner of this house. I mean who owns a holiday cottage with a bunker in the basement. This guy was definitely up to no good."

-Patrick: "Well, he deserved a bullet then. Now let's get his body inside. We don't want it found before we can get out of here."

He and the Doctor got the body inside. Sthandiwe went to get in the back seat of his car. She was drained and her body hurt like hell. She laid down on the seat and used the backpack as a pillow. Patrick and the Doctor came and got in the front.

-Patrick: "So, Tee, where did you say we're going now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not 'we'. You. You're gonna have to take it from here, buddy. I'm exhausted and I'm in a bad shape as you can see. So you're gonna have to go get Doc's wife alone."

-Patrick: "What? That's not a one-man op, Tee. What if I get killed out there?"

-Sthandiwe: "You came here to rescue me alone, didn't you? Well, you're gonna have to do the same thing again but for someone else this time around... Come on, Rick, you can do it. That's just a house, not the Vatican. You can go in and get that poor woman out of there. Besides, I think the guy you shot was the same man who was babysitting the woman. Which means you might find the house with a not-so-tight security."

-Patrick: "Fine, I'll do it. What's the address?"

She told him and he entered it to the GPS of the car then drove off.

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They got to where the house was but parked at a distance. Patrick got his gun ready then opened the door to get out.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, you better pull that cap down and also keep your head down. This house is not isolated, you do not wanna be identified by the neighbours."

-Patrick: (sarcastic) "Thanks for pointing out the obvious. You're smart."

But Sthandiwe didn't retaliate. She understood that he was just scared and nervous.

-Sthandiwe: "Goodluck."

He didn't say anything, he just got out of the car, his head down and his gun under his jacket.

Sthandiwe and the Doctor waited in the car, worried. Despite what Sthandiwe said, she knew that things could go shit-shaped inside that house and that Patrick could get hurt. But what was she to do? She couldn't go with him, she was really in a bad shape. Going in with him could only make things worse. She'd just be a liability and that's the last thing they both wanted.

She just laid down on that seat, praying. It was the only thing she could do. But her prayer didn't even get to have an "Amen", she got disturbed by the Doctor.

-The Doctor: (excited) "Here they come. They are both okay."

Sthandiwe got up and looked. They were really coming. She breathed a sigh of relief. The Doctor got out of the car and hugged his wife as soon as they got to the car. He was happy to get her back. She

looked fine, nothing was done to her, she was just kept against her will. But Patrick cut their reunion short by asking them to get in the car. They did and Patrick drove off without wasting any time.

-Sthandiwe: "What happened in there?"

-Patrick: "I found her alone, tied up to a chair. You were right that guy I shot was the man James assigned to watch her and he was working alone."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good. No more blood got spilled."

-Patrick: "Yeah... Doc, where's your house? I wanna drop you off and get out of this county."

The Doctor directed him and he went to drop him and his wife off. They were both grateful. And of course Sthandiwe was also grateful to the Doctor.

-The Doctor: "I'm sure you're now going to go back to your respective countries. But if you both happen to find yourselves here again, please come by. You now have friends in Sligo County."

They accepted the offer, said their goodbyes and drove back to Dublin.

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On the way, Patrick called Alannah and told her to check out of the hotel and go back to the apartment. And also get some medical supplies because Sthandiwe was hurt.

They got to the apartment around 15:30 and found Alannah already waiting for them. She gave them some food. And Sthandiwe just went to rinse her face and brushed her teeth then went to eat, she was really hungry. Then after eating she went to take a much needed shower, as it was a second day without taking one. When she was done, Alannah joined her in the bedroom to help dress the multiple wounds in her body, and stitch a few that needed to be stitched. Being stitched with no anaesthetic is painful but she had to be strong and take it. Then she got dressed in her PJs. And Alannah moved to take care of the cuts in her face. But they weren't major cuts. They were going to heal in no time.

-Alannah: "I'm really sorry you had to be roughed up like this because of me and my brother."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, don't worry about it."

-Alannah: "No seriously, I'm grateful. And our parents are grateful too. But you'll hear that from them when they get here."

-Sthandiwe: "They're coming here?"

-Alannah: "Yeah, later. You have no idea, losing another child was just gonna be too much for them."

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean?"

-Alannah: "We were three but we lost our big brother 6 years ago. He was a Navy SEAL and got kidnapped by the Taliban in Afghanistan. He got killed during the rescue operation."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh no, I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

-Alannah: "It's okay, we're moving on. But imagine if something similar to that were to happen again to another child of my parents. They were gonna be crushed... You helped my brother prevent it from happening so we'll forever be grateful to you. My family owes you."

Just then, Patrick walked in.

-Patrick: "Everything okay in here?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, we're cool."

He came to sit on the bed with them.

-Patrick: "Thanks again for what you did for me, Tee."

-Sthandiwe: "No, don't thank me. My father used to say helping another person is like making an investment. So if some day I call you asking for a favour I'll expect you to jump and come to my aid."

-Patrick: "Of course, of course. That goes without saying. Whenever you need help just shout."

-Sthandiwe: "Great."

-Alannah: "So when are you going back home, Tee?"

-Sthandiwe: "Today is Friday and according to my roundtrip ticket I have to get on that flight Wednesday next week. I planned on staying for a week, and do some sightseeing after the mission. But it doesn't look like I'm gonna be doing any sightseeing and I'm not going home either. Not with this face and not before Wednesday. I'm just gonna use the next few days to heal."

-Patrick: "I feel you. And again, I'm sorry it had to happen this way."

Sthandiwe just nodded.

-Alannah: "I'm just glad this is all over. Now I can go back home and continue with my residency."

-Sthandiwe: "You're a doctor?"

-Alannah: "Yeah. First year residency. But then I had to leave everything behind, hop onto a plane and come here."

-Sthandiwe: "My mom was a doctor too. But I didn't know that you're also one because Patrick never told me. However, I could see from the way you stitched my wounds that you knew what you were doing."

-Alannah: (smiling) "Of course my brother didn't say anything because he hates that there's someone who's smarter than him in the family."

-Patrick: (smiling too) "Okay now you're embarrassing me."

They all laughed.

Alannah finished up then gave Sthandiwe some pain tablets. She took them then got to bed. She really needed to get some rest.

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She slept for 3 hours straight, and only woke up at 19:30 when Alannah went to wake her up, telling her that dinner was ready and that her parents were in. She got up and went to clean up her face and washed her hands. Then she put on some appropriate clothes and went to join Mr and Mrs Doyle at the table, together with their two children and Jake. They couldn't stop thanking her for what she did and asking if she didn't want to go to the hospital to be checked for internal injuries. But Sthandiwe and hospitals don't mix. And she's not good with praises either. She just wanted them to stop praising her as if she was some hero and eat their food. But of course she couldn't tell them that. She just let them go on and on until they decided to stop on their own. Hoooo! Now she could breathe. But they were truly nice people and it felt good to sit around the table with them - in a family setup. They all enjoyed their dinner while getting to know each other some more. And the food was really good. Alannah had outdone herself in the kitchen.

The parents left after 21:30 and went back to the hotel they were staying in. And Jake went back to his apartment. Patrick helped Alannah do the dishes as Sthandiwe went back to bed, she was still not feeling good.

The apartment had two bedrooms. So Alannah took the second bedroom and Patrick slept on the couch in the lounge.

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The next day, on Saturday, Sthandiwe just woke up to take a shower, change the wound dressings and eat then went back to bed. She spent the entire day in bed. But Alannah kept her company, having their girl conversations. She was, without a doubt, finding Alannah to be a really nice person, just like her parents. And they were bonding.

On Sunday, she woke up and asked her to take her to church.

-Alannah: "Church?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Alannah, I didn't make it out of that bunker alive because of me, I made it out because of God. And I want to properly thank Him for that."

-Alannah: "I see."

-Sthandiwe: "Some months back I made a promise to myself and to God that I would never use a gun or take a life again but I didn't keep that promise. But even so, God didn't turn his back on me, He helped me survive. And for that I need to praise him."

-Alannah: "You and Patrick have a lot in common, huh. He's also a strong Christian. I think you should go with him to church, he's getting ready to go as we speak."

Sthandiwe was cool with that. She got ready then left with Patrick. She did what she wanted to do in church then later they went back to the apartment. And she spent the entire afternoon in bed again, and only got up to eat dinner. She was still not feeling okay.

But on Monday she woke up feeling a lot better. She even went to the kitchen to help Alannah make breakfast after bathing. And it was during that breakfast that they told her about Jake's parents anniversary party that was going to be in that afternoon, and they asked her to go. She didn't have a problem with that because she also wanted to get out of the apartment and meet other people.

So later they all got ready. But she had no party clothes, so Alannah lent her her own maroon body-hugging dress, wine red heels and a coat. It was cold in Ireland. And that worked to her advantage because she had cuts and bruises all over her arms that needed to be covered. Then Alannah helped her cover the scars on her face with make up. And styled her hair. She looked great, and Patrick couldn't stop complimenting her. She was going to be his plus one after all.

They got to the party and it was great. But what annoyed her was people who kept thinking that she and Patrick were an item. They would make comments like, "You look great together." and "It's good to see you moving on, Patrick." It was just too much, she even got tired of correcting them and just let them be. But apart from that she enjoyed herself out there. They left around 22:00 and she went to bed in high spirits for once in days. Yeah, interacting with new people would do that you.

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The next morning, on Tuesday, she borrowed Patrick's phone to call Chris. She told him that she was going to be flying back home the next day. And of course, Chris was excited and couldn't wait to see her. And the feeling was mutual, she couldn't wait to see him either.

That single phone call changed her mood. She felt rejuvenated and alive. And when she hung up, all she wanted was to go out and do some sightseeing. Something she had already cancelled in her head. She dragged Patrick and Alannah out of the apartment. It was her last day in the country after all, so she had to do some exploring. They took her to some of the must-see places around the city and of course they took some pictures to document everything. It was really fun. And she had completely forgotten about everything that had happened with James. Ireland hadn't been nice to her but she sure enjoyed her last day there.

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Wednesday finally came and she was going home. Yippee!! In the morning Jake and Patrick's parents came to say goodbye and gave her some gifts. By 14:30 she was already ready even though her flight was only at 17:40. She just couldn't wait to get home.

Patrick walked into the bedroom as she was packing the last of her stuff in her bag, and stood in the doorway.

-Patrick: "So this is it?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. But we'll see each other again."

-Patrick: "We sure will. Still going back to Okinawa?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Watashi wa SA ni ikimasu. Sorekara, Okinawa ni ikimasu. [I'll go to SA. And then I'll go to Okinawa.]"

-Patrick: "Your Japanese is good, hey."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, I was staying with Sensei Makishi and you know how he is. He has a way of forcing things into people's head."

-Patrick: (laughing) "I know right."

-Sthandiwe: "But even so, I really respect him. That's why I'm gonna go back to Okinawa and tell him face to face that I'm no longer coming to stay. I promised him that I'd come back but now that I'm not, I'm not gonna tell him over the phone. That would be rude."

-Patrick: "You're no longer going back there? But what about your acceptance at OIST?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm gonna tell them that I'm no longer interested. Rick, I applied there when I thought I had nothing to be in SA for. But now things have changed."

-Patrick: "Now you have Chris."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

-Patrick: "And that's good... We're also going back home tomorrow. So everyone is getting back to their normal life. Everything worked out well."

-Sthandiwe: "And I'm glad... So does that mean you're going back to being a lawyer?"

-Patrick: "I dunno, hey. I'm still yet to figure that one out. Or maybe I'll just find something else to do. But I gotta pay the bills, I can't expect my parents to keep providing for me."

-Sthandiwe: "How many?"

-Patrick: (confused) "How many what?"

-Sthandiwe: "You said out of all the cases you ever worked you've won about 95% of them, right? So my question is, how many were of innocent people?"

-Patrick: "I dunno. Maybe half of them. Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "I think you should focus on that. You did some good. You kept innocent people, people who didn't deserve to be behind bars, out of jail. You gave them their freedom. And that's an amazing thing. You can't hate or see your job as something bad or a curse because of one stupid moron who

decided to take things personal. I think you should consider going back to your world, and do what you've always been doing all these years, which is being a good defense lawyer."

He nodded.

-Patrick: "I promise to think about it, okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Fair enough."

-Patrick: "And hey, thanks once again for coming to my aid when I called."

-Sthandiwe: "And thanks for doing what you could to find me. If you didn't come I probably would have died in that cottage. Because I was gonna be sure that I killed James and his remaining man and let my guard down, and that guy was gonna drop me with a bullet as soon as I stepped out of that cottage. So thank you."

-Patrick: "Hey, don't thank me. I only did what was expected of me. I brought you here, I got you into trouble so the least I could do was get you out of it and make sure that you fly back home safe and sound."

-Sthandiwe: "No. When I look at you I don't see a man that brought me here and got me into trouble, I see a man that helped me keep the promise I made to Chris. I promised that I'd get back to him alive and in one piece and you helped me keep that promise."

Patrick just walked over to her and gave her a hug.

And when she pulled back, Sthandiwe noticed that he had a small gift box in his hand.

-Sthandiwe: "What, is that mine?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, it's yours but you can only open it when you're home."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "That's cool, that's cool. Thank you."

He handed it to her and she put it in her bag.

Then Patrick and Alannah drove her to the airport.

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At the airport she said her goodbyes to her new American friends. Then Alannah walked back to the car and left her with Patrick.

-Patrick: "Remember when we first met in Okinawa? You ran away from me at the airport but then we met again at the hotel. And I kept saying 'this is a sign'. Remember that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course. And I asked, a sign for what?"

-Patrick: "I didn't know, still don't. But what I do know is that you coming into my life has been nothing but a blessing. And I appreciate you."

She laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "We are getting all corny now, aren't we? But hey, on a serious note, I appreciate you too. I also remember what you said when we were at the beach back in Okinawa. You said I may have lost my old friends back home but now I've gained you. What's good is that I still have them and I also have you. I couldn't be happier."

-Patrick: "When are we going to see each other again?"

-Sthandiwe: "I honestly don't know. But when we do it would definitely not be in this country. I don't think I'd ever set my foot here again. I had a very bad experience."

He laughed.

-Patrick: "Okay then, I'll see you in South Africa. I would love to visit your country some day soon."

-Sthandiwe: "That would be cool. I'd really love that."

-Patrick: "Well, until then I'll keep in touch via phone calls, FaceTime and texting."

She nodded. And she had to go board.

-Sthandiwe: "Mata kandou. [Next time]"

-Patrick: "Genki de. [Take care of yourself.]"

-Sthandiwe: "Ki wo tsuteke. [Be careful.] And don't be too relaxed when you're back home, keep your eyes peeled. You don't know what might turn up around the corner."

He nodded and gave her a hug. Then she walked away to board her flight, leaving Ireland and every bad thing that had happened to her while there behind.

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She landed in OR Tambo the next day, on Thursday, at 10:50. And the feeling she had inside, the feeling of being back home alive, was something she couldn't put into words. She used to hear some people complaining about South Africa, some even joking about migrating to Australia. But do those people know how good it really feels to be able to walk on this South African soil after coming so close to dying in a foreign country? Maybe they do or maybe they don't. But that didn't matter to her. What mattered was how much it meant to her. Being back home alive, touching the South African ground, was just priceless. She even found herself looking down, praying, thanking the Lord for protecting her, as she walked to get a cab. But that prayer got cut short as she bumped into someone. She looked up and saw this white guy, with his travel bag slung over his shoulder, looking for something in his wallet. She stopped and apologised. The guy just smiled and said it was okay. She moved along and went to get a taxi to take her home.

When she got home, she got her phone and called Chris to tell him that she was home. And his response was, he would be in Joburg in the evening. Great. But instead of taking a shower and rest in

the meantime, she chose to go out and take care of a couple of things. She took her phone and called her lawyer asking for a meet. When he agreed, she went to take a shower. Then put on blue ripped jeans, white heels and a white shirt. Unlike in Ireland, she didn't have to dress warm.

And she had to cover her scarred face with makeup again. Then she took her bag and went out. She had to get an update on the sale of her Hyde Park house from her lawyer. But just as she thought, there had been a lot of viewings but not a single offer made. But she wasn't disappointed, she understood that selling a house isn't like selling fruit. Especially a house of that size and in the area that it was in.

After leaving her lawyer's office she went to see KG at his workplace, it was lunch hour after all. But when she got there, she was told that he was out at the gym. Apparently, he would spend his lunch hour at the nearby gym everyday, doing boxing.

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So she went to the gym and found him up in the ring with his trainer.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Rocky."

Of course KG recognised that voice. He turned and saw her. And an instant smile formed in his face.

-KG: "ST?"

He didn't know that she was coming back so it was really a pleasant surprise. He immediately excused himself from his trainer, rushed down to her and gave her a warm hug.

KG: (excited) "You're back."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah and I see you're now doing boxing. That's good."

But he noticed her roughed up face even under that makeup.

-KG: "Your face. Something happened in Ireland, didn't it?"

She couldn't lie, she told him what happened.

-KG: "I knew that something was up when you just left like that. And I didn't like it."

-Sthandiwe: "And I didn't tell you what was going on because I knew that you'd stop me."

-KG: "Damn right I was. ST, you don't have any other brother but me. So I have to look out for you."

-Sthandiwe: "And I sure appreciate that but that's not why I'm here. I'm here because I want us to do a song for Sihle's vow renewal ceremony."

-KG: "You know that it's this coming Saturday, right? Besides, the last I checked you were no longer doing music."

-Sthandiwe: "I still don't but this is an exception. Sihle's my friend and I gotta do this for her."

-KG: "Well, I am already doing a song for her. She's gonna walk down the aisle to my song."

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, that's cool. But I think we should do another song together for the reception... Hey, I'm back now so things need to change a bit around here."

KG pondered that, then:

-KG: "Okay, fine I'm in."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Let's meet tomorrow after work then and put something together. Tomorrow's the only day we have so we gotta work extra hard."

-KG: "Why not start today after work?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, I can't. I'll be with Chris."

-KG: "So you two are back together?"

She was surprised that he didn't know. Or maybe Chris didn't say anything to him because he was still not sure about them getting back together.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, we are. But we'll talk about that some other time. Let me leave you to your training."

-KG: "Okay, see you tomorrow then. Glad you're back."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad I'm back too."

She gave him a hug then left. It was really good to be back, back to her normal life.

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When she got home she threw herself on the couch and kicked off her shoes. Then she took her phone and called Palesa, Sihle and Xolisa and told them that she was back.

After those calls she rested on the couch. And since she was tired, she passed out almost immediately.

She only woke up when she heard the doorbell. She got up and checked the time, it was just before 19:00. She went to open and found Chris standing on her doorstep, looking handsome as ever.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam. I'm sorry for everything."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "I know."

She pulled him inside and gave him a hot, passionate kiss.

Insert #89

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Back To Normal!

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Chris immediately took control. His mouth was on Sthandiwe's, hard and passionate. He pushed her against the wall and deepened the kiss. Their tongues caressed each other, and the heat was building up. A hot wave of desire was surging over Sthandiwe, making her whole body tremble. Hell, it had been three whole months since she'd been intimate with him, or any other man for that matter. She wanted him so badly. And it was evident that the feeling was mutual.

-Chris: "Let's take this upstairs."

He said huskily. And lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her long legs around his waist, and she could feel his erection against her butt, and that drove her crazy even more. Her arms were wrapped around his neck and her face pressed against his throat. The feel of his hard body, the clean male scent of his skin, the possessive touch of his hands were all sending electric shocks throughout her body. And she wanted to get to that bedroom as fast as possible. Her man was also feeling the urgency. He made the distance from the front door, up the stairs and to the main bedroom seem like nothing - a distance you could cover in less than 5 seconds, that's how fast he was. When he got to the bedroom, he kicked the door open and went to lay her on the bed. He kicked his shoes off and climbed on the bed, on top of her. His mouth found hers almost of its own volition. He took possession of her lips with a heated urgency that betrayed his hungry need. Soon they were tugging at each other's clothes, wanting to get rid of them. But the kind of clothes they were both wearing were not easily discarded. However, with each other's help they were both soon naked. But as soon as he noticed the scars on her body, Chris reared away.

-Chris: (horrified) "Thandi, what is this? What happened?"

Oh, gosh. At a time like this, really? Jeez! Trust Christopher Motaung to be a mood killer.

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She sat up straight, covered her face with both hands and took a deep breath.

-Chris: "Well?"

He had climbed down the bed, but still standing close to her. She removed the hands on her face and looked up at him.

-Sthandiwe: "Please sit down. How am I supposed to talk with you hovering over me like this?"

But he didn't sit down.

-Chris: "Just tell me what happened in Ireland."

And this time it sounded like an order.

-Sthandiwe: "I was beaten and tortured. That's what happened. Okay?"

-Chris: "What? Why?"

He asked as he sat down on the bed beside her. She told him everything. But by the time she finished, he was already off the bed again and pacing back and forth on the mat in front of it.

-Chris: "Patrick. Patrick the same guy you were with in Okinawa? The same guy you told me Alizwa ran over with a car?"

He asked a little harshly. His eyes were dark. And she could see that he was beyond pissed but he was trying to control himself.

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean 'with in Okinawa?' Chris, I wasn't on that island with Patrick. I went there alone and Patrick happened to be there too."

-Chris: "All the same... Just tell me this, what is he to you?"

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean? Patrick is my friend, that's it."

-Chris: "Are you sure there's nothing more to it?"

-Sthandiwe: "How could you even ask me that, Chris?"

-Chris: "You got tortured. You went through hell for him. That tells me he means a hell lot to you."

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, he does. All my friends do. You know me, Chris. I never let my friends go through hell without me lending a hand where I can. Patrick is no exception."

-Chris: "Doesn't he have other friends that could help him? Why did it have to be you?"

-Sthandiwe: "The only friends he could trust were his friends back home but they wouldn't help him. Not after what happened in Phoenix. I just told you that he lost two friends there when they went after that Richard guy. So now his remaining friends weren't up for round 2."

-Chris: "They wouldn't risk their lives. But you did. This Patrick must be really special to you."

-Sthandiwe: "What is this, Chris? Do you remember what happened between us before I left for Okinawa? You ended things because you were jealous of something that wasn't even there. Do you want the same thing to happen again?"

-Chris: "Of course that's not what I want. I just need to know what's going on."

-Sthandiwe: "What you need to do is to get your jealousy in check. You act stupid because of it."

-Chris: "Just like you."

He muttered.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah just like the old me. I worked on that and I'd never act that way again. And you shouldn't either. Patrick is just a friend, nothing more."

Chris didn't say anything, just staring at her. That look convinced her that he wasn't believing her, not entirely.

-Sthandiwe: "Seriously, Chris? Patrick also sees me as just a friend, nothing more. You know what he said before we went out on that mission? He said when I'm out there I should fight hard so I could get back to you. And that's exactly what I did. I was already giving up but then I thought of you. I thought of the promise I made to you, that I'd come back to you alive and in one piece. And that's when I told myself that I have to fight. And I did... You know, me going to Ireland actually worked in both our favour. I knew that I could die out there, and I came so close, which made me see things clearly. That experience made me realise that I really don't wanna be without you. That I wanna grow old with you. My worst fear was dying in that hellhole of a bunker without you. That's why I fought so hard to get out of there. I fought to come back to you. And now you're doing this crap?"

She was crying as she talked. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. And Chris was now feeling bad, he was feeling like a fool. Regretting the way he had just spoken to her. He sat down on the bed and came closer to her.

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He wiped her tears off and whispered close to her face.

-Chris: "I'm sorry... I love you, so much."

And before she could say anything back, his lips were on hers. She tried to push him off but truth was she didn't want to stop him. She responded. His lips tasted so sweet. And her internal craving was yearning to be fulfilled. Soon they were back where they had left things off. And before she knew it, he had buried himself inside her. She gasped. Gosh, it had been too long. And he felt good inside of her.

And his laboured breathing was an indication of how hard it had been for him to hold back for so long too.

-Chris: "I love you."

He said in a shaken voice. And Sthandiwe's nails dug possessively into his back.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you too."

She whispered brokenly. As they both moved with the same pace. And although their lovemaking was curtailed when Chris' body convulsed with his release a moment later, Sthandiwe was only seconds behind him. He got off of her and laid next to her, pulling her closer to him, both catching their breaths.

-Chris: "I'm sorry, I got there early. Thing is, I've wanted you for so long."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, me too."

-Chris: "This has been the longest three months of my whole life."

-Sthandiwe: "And mine."

She whispered winding her arms around his neck and kissing him. They kissed. And soon they were making love again.

It was after that long second round that they could feel that their stomach's were empty. They went downstairs to see what KG had in the kitchen, as he was still staying in the house.

The only quick thing they could cook in there was pasta and mince. And that's what they cooked, together, laughing, talking nonsense, just like old times. In no time, their stupid meal was ready and they ate. Then went back to the bedroom. It was now around 21:00.

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She closed her eyes as she slept on his bare chest, with his arm around her, happy that she was back to him, with him. It was the purest form of delight to be this close to him again, to know that, whatever happened now, they were together.

-Chris: "I can't tell you how happy I am now that you're here with me. God, I needed this. Thank you for giving us another chance, babe. I really thought I'd lost you forever. And I was like, yeah I deserve it."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm giving us another chance because I love you. And I know that you love me too. I mean, all that trouble you went through, going to look for me in Okinawa..."

-Chris: "Baby, I'd turn the world upside down to get to you... And, everything that happened actually served me right, after everything I had done to you. I was a fool for letting you go, sthandwa sam. I really was."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, you were. But you are my fool now."

She teased, earning a playful slap from Chris. She giggled.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you, little fool. For ever and a day."

-Chris: "Not more than I love you. I never wanna lose you again, sthandwa sam."

-Sthandiwe: "You're never gonna lose me, babe... In one of the videos you emailed me you said you hope you never see the day that I move on and be happy with another man. Well, you can rest assured that's never going to happen. I love you and only you."

-Chris: "I love you more, MamTshawe."

He held her tight and kissed her forehead. And they continued chatting, until they fell asleep in each other's arms.

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She woke up in the morning still in his arms, but he was still fast asleep. She looked up at him with utter contentment. They were together, and that was the most satisfying thing of all. Everything else that had happened was in the past, and they were moving on.

She smiled as she watched his innocent face, deep asleep. Then she rolled over and took her phone to check the time. It was time for her to wake up. She slowly got out of bed, careful not to wake him. But as she was tiptoeing to the bathroom, he woke up.

-Chris: "Hey, why are you up? Isn't it still early?"

She stopped and turned to him.

-Sthandiwe: "It's just before 7:00 and I really need to take a shower and get out of here?"

-Chris: "Get out of here and go where?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm meeting Sihle and your sister. When I called Sihle yesterday, she asked me to meet them at her place at 8:00. Neither of them is going to work today, they want to finalise tomorrow's ceremony preparations... They'll bring me up to speed on everything and I'll also help out with the final arrangements."

-Chris: "Yeah, yeah, yeah. But can't you join them a little later?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, babe, I can't."

He climbed down the bed, walked over to her and hugged her from behind.

-Chris: "I'm not gonna see you tonight because you're gonna be with KG, so the least you could do is spend the next hour with me... Please."

-Sthandiwe: "I'd love to, babe, but..."

He didn't let her finish, he lifted her and tumbled her into the bed. She giggled and scrambled away from him. But he crawled onto the bed after her, catching her ankle and turning her onto her back.

-Chris: "Come here."

He said imprisoning her wrists above her head with one hand. Then he allowed his free hand to stroke a sensuous path from her throat to her breasts and beyond. She really wanted to get going, but she couldn't deny that he wanted her. She spread her legs, allowing him to get in between them. He leaned down to kiss her neck, and whispered in her ear.

-Chris: "You were saying?"

He asked mockingly, knowing very well that she was no longer wanting to go.

-Sthandiwe: "You're a devil."

-Chris: "But you love me still."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "Unfortunately, I do."

He continued kissing her neck and went down to her breasts. Any control she had was rapidly being eroded.

-Sthandiwe: "But, babe, I have to..."

But her protesting words were stifled by his kiss. A long drugging kiss. She responded. Neither of them minded each other's morning breath. And soon they were making love. After that they went to take a shower together, and made love in the shower again. Over and over again. And it was really good. By the time they tumbled back into bed again they were both exhausted. Chris passed out almost immediately. But Sthandiwe didn't, she rested a bit then got up and went to lotion. And put on navy chino pants, white top, navy blazer and black heels. Then did the much needed make-up. And went to the study, took some documents off the shelf and put them in her bag. Then she took the bag and went down to the kitchen to have some cereal, leaving Chris still sleeping in the bedroom.

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He only got down to the kitchen when she was already done eating and washing the bowl she had used.

-Chris: "Hey, why didn't you wake me up?"

He asked as he sat down on one of the high chairs.

-Sthandiwe: "So you'd stop me again? Not a chance."

She said drying the bowl and returned it back in the cupboard.

-Chris: "I guess I deserve that. Anyway, what's for breakfast?"

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, you know that this hasn't been my kitchen for too long. And last night we both saw that the cupboards are almost empty. But there's cereal."

-Chris: "Okay then, cereal it is."

-Sthandiwe: "You'll be home in Melrose, right?"

-Chris: "Yeah."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'm leaving now but don't worry about the key, don't leave it in the porch when you leave, take it with you. I'll use KG's copy when I want to get in later... And you can use my car, I'll take my mom's."

-Chris: "Oh, so I must use the automatic? Hell no, babe, I hate driving an automatic car. That's not driving at all."

-Sthandiwe: "Ummh what's that they say about beggars, again?"

He got up and went to her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed her against the sink she was standing next to.

-Chris: "I'm not a beggar, I'm your man."

He muttered against her mouth. Then kissed her.

-Sthandiwe: (pulling back) "Yes, you are my man. But you're still taking the automatic. You won't bribe me with a kiss, and you definitely won't drive my mom's car."

He chuckled.

-Chris: "Damn...I thought I had you there."

-Sthandiwe: (laughing) "You're so evil... Let me get going, babe. I'll see you tomorrow but we'll talk over the phone. Okay?"

-Chris: "Okay, have a great day, sthandwa sam."

-Sthandiwe: "You too."

He gave her a peck on the lips then she left.

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But before she went over to Sihle's, she drove to see someone else. Rachel, a woman that was her mother's friend. She went to see her at her office as she wanted to pitch to her, wanting a job. Because now that she was back home, she needed something to do. She was in no desperate need of the money, but she needed something to do, to keep herself busy. And Rachel was an MD of a company in her field. She could hook her up with something, but she wanted to impress her first, sell herself to her. It was about time she used her skills in the private sector. But she didn't want to tell Chris until something came of it.

She met up with Rachel, did what she wanted to do then left. Rachel promised to call her if something comes up.

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She drove to Sihle's house and found her and Palesa already waiting. After all the hugging and everything, they went to sit in Sihle's bedroom and they brought her up to speed on everything.

When Sihle got married, she didn't have a huge wedding. It was just small, intimate. So now with this vow renewal ceremony she was going all out. Everything she didn't have on her big day.

-Sihle: "Okay, now, chomi, I want you to put on the dress I got for you and see if it fits."

-Sthandiwe: "A dress?"

-Sihle: "Yes, you are one of my bridesmaids, remember?"

-Sthandiwe: "I am? But you never told me that."

-Sihle: "Duh, you were one of the bridesmaids at my wedding, so I thought it was obvious."

-Sthandiwe: "But, Sihle, I wasn't here so I'm sure you already have someone who was gonna take my spot."

-Sihle: "Yeah, I do but you're here now so we don't need her anymore. And she understands... Now just take the dress and try it on."

She said taking it out of the closet and handing it to her. She looked at it and it was a boob-tube dress.

-Sthandiwe: "Ummmh, chomi, I really think you should go with whoever was my substitute. I can't wear this dress."

-Palesa: "What? Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because..."

She said that taking her blazer off, revealing the cuts in her arms.

-Palesa: "What? What the hell happened to you?"

She told them everything.

-Palesa: "So you went to Ireland for this? No, no, Thandi, you need to stop this. You need to quit this lifestyle and be a lady."

-Sthandiwe: "What was that?"

She asked as she came closer to her. Palesa was now stepping on her toe, and she didn't appreciate it.

-Palesa: "You heard me. Be a lady."

-Sthandiwe: "What's your definition of a 'lady?' Tell me."

-Palesa: "I'm saying quit this lifestyle. My brother can't take this anymore."

-Sthandiwe: "Keep Chris out of this. And oh, so by being a 'lady' you mean I should be soft and pathetic like you, huh? Listen here, Miss Little Sunshine, I didn't choose this 'lifestyle', it happened to me. Things happened to me and instead of rolling over and play victim, like you, I chose to fight back. Because I refuse to have anyone do as they please with me. And Ireland? Well, I chose that one. I chose to go there because I wanted to help a friend. Because that's what I do, that's who I am. I'll always do anything and everything, including putting my life in danger, to help a friend. Because that's what friendship means to me, having each other's backs always. Which is more than I can say for you. But you know what, I'll always do the same for you too. Just like I did twice in varsity. If you ever find yourself in a shit-hole again, like before, I'd be there to pull you out. Because your soft, bratty ass

would never last even a minute in the kind of life or death situations I've faced... I saved you twice before and I'd save you again when you need saving. So next time you wanna say shit like the one you just said, you may wanna stop and reflect first."

Palesa kept quiet, knowing very well that she was right.

-Sihle: "Okay, emotions are running high in here. So let's all calm down and..."

-Sthandiwe: "No, Sihle, some things need to be said. Y'all ain't loyal no more. You are so fucking judgemental. You judge me first then reflect later. And that's just fucked up."

-Sihle: "Chomi, I..."

-Sthandiwe: (cutting her off) "No, I don't need no justifications. I've said what I wanted to say, I've gotten it out of my chest. So now can we please continue with what we're here for?"

-Sihle: "Oh...okay, I guess we can do that."

Sthandiwe meant it. She had said what she wanted to say and she was now moving on, no hard feelings. She had passed the message and it was received. Whatever they did with it after that was up to them.

-Sthandiwe: "Great... So like I said, you're gonna have to use my substitute, I can't wear this dress."

-Sihle: "That's okay, chomi. I'll call her and tell her."

It became a little tense after that but they continued with what they had to do.

Insert #90

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"Ityala Aliboli - Justice Has No Expiry Date"

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Sthandiwe did what she had to do with the girls, in preparation of the ceremony, even though there was some tension between them. Actually, it was them who were tense, she wasn't. She had no reason to be.

After they were done at the house, they went to the venue where the ceremony was going to take place. They had to be there for the rehearsal. They found Sihle's mom and Muzi's mom, the only parents the couple had, already there from the hotel they were staying in. Sihle and Muzi had to book them into a hotel because they came from Durban. The groomsmen, 4 of Muzi's friends, were already there too. And so were the rest of the bridesmaids. It was like a wedding all over again. And

Sthandiwe couldn't help but wish it was her own wedding. But Chris hadn't mentioned anything of that sort the previous night or that morning. Maybe he was no longer sure about marrying her. She thought. And that wasn't just disappointing, it hurt. Because, after everything that had happened, there was nothing she wanted more than being his wife.

Anyway, Muzi arrived a little later and the rehearsal commenced.

Sthandiwe watched as they did their thing. And she had to be happy for her friend despite her feelings about her own wedding that seemed to be far from happening. And, believe it or not, she really was happy for her.

And another thing that made her feel good was that they already had a grand piano up on the stage. That was good because she too was gonna need it during the ceremony.

She walked over to the ceremony planner and talked her into including her in the reception program. And she agreed.

Then she helped out where she could but at 16:00 she had to leave because she was meeting KG at her place for their own rehearsal.

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When she got home, she went to park her car in the garage. And she found KG's Corolla there, which meant he was already home.

And as soon as she walked inside the house she got welcomed by food aroma from the kitchen. And that's where she headed. KG was there and he smiled immediately when he saw her coming in.

-KG: "Sis' wam. [My sister.]"

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, gazi... It smells nice in here. What are you cooking?"

-KG: "Cooking? I ain't cooking I'm just warming some takeout food. Come sit down so we can eat."

She went to sit on one of the high chairs as KG took out the plates.

-Sthandiwe: "I think I could get used to this, hey. Coming home to find my favourite brother in."

-KG: "Hey, I'm your only brother."

She laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "I know. Which is why I was thinking you shouldn't move out now that I'm back. I was thinking you should do the opposite, actually. Take all your belongings from home and move in."

-KG: "Really? Hey, do you know why you and I are this close? It's because we think alike. I was also thinking the same thing."

-Sthandiwe: (smiling) "I'm not sure about us thinking alike, but I'd really love it if you could come stay with me."

-KG: "Plus, here I'm closer to work than driving from Palmridge. I'll talk to MaKhumalo and I'm sure she won't have a problem because technically I had already moved out of home."

That was good. He finished dishing up and they sat down to eat.

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Sthandiwe's phone beeped, a message from Chris telling her just how much he was missing her. She smiled and replied.

-KG: "And what are you smiling about?"

-Sthandiwe: "It's just a message from Chris."

-KG: "So you two are really back together, huh?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. We're in a good space right now and I couldn't be happier."

-KG: "That's good. But why are you asking me to move in with you? Aren't you supposed to be moving to Cape Town? I mean, that's what you wanted to do before you and Chris had a falling out last year."

-Sthandiwe: "No, plans have changed. I'm staying right here. I'll only move to Cape Town when...I mean IF Chris and I get married."

-KG: "Why 'if' now?"

-Sthandiwe: "He hasn't said anything about that. Maybe he no longer wants to marry me."

-KG: "C'mon, that's ridiculous. You two just got back together, so maybe the guy thinks it's still early to be talking about that."

-Sthandiwe: "Maybe. Anyway, how are you and Palesa doing?"

-KG: "Good. No, great, actually. And speaking of, she tells me you two had some friction this morning."

-Sthandiwe: "And she had to tell you about it. Amen... Anyway, I wouldn't call it a friction. I just told her the truth. And you know that it hurts. But she needed to hear it. Hell, Sihle needed to hear it too. And Xolisa still needs to hear it. They need to change. Their loyalty fades sometimes and that's not cool. Especially knowing that I'm always loyal to them. I never waver, KG. And I expect the same from them too. Not judgements."

-KG: "I hope you know that I'd never judge you. I didn't judge you even when they did. Even about this Ireland mission I wasn't judging you I was only expressing my concerns. I was worried about you. I really worry about you, ST. And that's because I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I know and I appreciate that. I know that you'll always have my back, unlike my other friends... Anyway, let's finish up here and start working. I already know the song we should do. And I've downloaded the sheet music online. You'll take the guitar chords, I'll take the piano and we'll do the vocals together."

-KG: (excited) "Just like old times."

Yeah, just like old times. They finished eating, washed their plates then went upstairs to the music room.

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They worked until around 23:30. But as they got up to go to their bedrooms, Sthandiwe felt light-headed. She tried to hold onto the desk but she fell before she could reach it.

-KG: (freaked out) "ST?! ST, are you okay?"

He said kneeling next to her trying to see what was wrong.

-Sthandiwe: "Low blood sugar. I had this in Ireland. Just...just get me something to eat and I'll be fine. My...my energy bars."

KG didn't waste any time, he rushed out to the kitchen to get the energy bars. He came back with them and some juice. Then he helped her sit up straight on the floor and made her lean against the wall so she could refuel her body. And she did. By the time she was done she was already feeling better. And KG was sitting right next to her.

-KG: "You say this happened in Ireland too?"

She nodded.

-KG: "You're not pregnant, are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course not. I didn't sleep with anyone after the miscarriage. Well, up until last night."

-KG: "Okay, too much info... But that means this is serious, ST. I think you should find the underlying cause before it gets worse."

-Sthandiwe: "And I will. Next week."

-KG: "How about tomorrow?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, tomorrow I have to be there for Sihle. I'll go see my doctor on Monday."

-KG: "ST, your health should come first. Hey, you're my only sister. I love you and I don't wanna lose you because of some weird disease that could be controlled if found early. You do not wanna see me cry, do you? Hey, I don't do that because..."

-Sthandiwe: (finishing for him) "Because you've got a reputation as this carefree being. So you don't wanna seem soft or in touch with your emotions. That's why you don't really show your emotions in front of people. Am I right?"

-KG: "Something like that... But I want you to know that I care a lot about you. And when you were in Ireland I couldn't rest, because I knew that something was going on and I didn't know how safe you were out there. So now that you're back, I can't let you neglect your health. ST, we may not be sharing the same blood but you're still my little sister, everything else is just biology. So I gotta take care of you."

-Sthandiwe: "Awww that's sweet. Who knew that Kagiso Phiri has this soft side to him."

She said that laughing.

-Sthandiwe: "But hey, on a serious note, I love you too. You know I do. You're my brother... I remember before the rape thing, before my father started having a problem with you, my parents treated you as their son. And MaKhumalo too, she always treated me like her own daughter. And she hasn't stopped."

-KG: "Exactly. And now as your brother I say go to the doctor's tomorrow."

-Sthandiwe: "And as your hard-headed sister I say hell no."

They both laughed.

-KG: "You really are stubborn... But I'll always be in your corner. You know that, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "I do. And I'll always cover your back too, gazi."

He took her hand on his and held it tight. Then:

-KG: "Come, let's get you to bed."

He pulled her up and took her in his arms, out of the music room and to her bedroom. He put her on the bed, and:

-KG: "Okay, now let me leave you to it. Goodnight."

-Sthandiwe: "It's just after 00:00 now so technically it's morning."

-KG: "Whatever, smartass."

They both laughed as he walked out to the spare room he had been using all those months. Leaving Sthandiwe changing into her PJs and getting to bed.

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In the morning, she got up and started getting ready for the ceremony. As she opened the closet for something to wear, she saw the bag she took with to Ireland and she remembered Patrick's gift. She

took it out of the bag and went to sit on the bed to open it. It was a small crane made of white gold, in a key ring. So basically, it was a keyholder. She smiled to herself, loving it.

Then she went back to the closet and took out a long-sleeved, long body hugging dress with a side slit. It was cream in colour, and she chose it because the theme colours for the ceremony were Cream and Lilac. She put it on with cream heels, and silver accessories. She looked great, especially with the way she did her make up.

As she was about to walk out to check on KG a call came through. It was a private number. She didn't want to answer it but she ended up answering.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello."

-Caller: "Hey, Tee. It's Patrick."

-Sthandiwe: (excited) "Rick, hey. How's it going?"

-Patrick: "I'm good. How are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. Hey, you should stop hiding your caller ID. I almost didn't take your call."

-Patrick: "It comes with being on the run for too long. But I'll fix it... How's home?"

-Sthandiwe: "Home's great, man. It's good to be back here. You're also home now, right?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, I got here in the early hours of this morning."

-Sthandiwe: "This morning? Didn't you leave Ireland on Thursday?"

-Patrick: "Yes, and today is Friday. Just after 23:00."

She laughed at herself for forgetting about the time difference.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, different time zone, again. I forgot. So how's home?"

-Patrick: "It's good. I'm settling in well. After 6 months in hiding."

-Sthandiwe: "But be careful still, okay?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, I know. Anyway, did you check out my gift?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, and I love it, Rick. I really do."

-Patrick: "I'm glad you like it. It's not about the keyholder itself, it's about the crane. You know, in Japan the crane is a mystical creature that is believed to live for a thousand years. And it is of that reason that in the Japanese culture it represents good fortune and longevity. And that is exactly what I wish for you."

-Sthandiwe: "Awww you're so sweet. Thanks, Rick. I really appreciate it."

-Rick: "Hey, you also gave me your good luck charm, your twin "Eye of Ra" discs. So I was returning the favour."

-Sthandiwe: "But still...thank you."

-Patrick: "Cool... Hey, listen, there's another call coming through so I'm gonna have to call you again tomorrow. And don't worry, I'll text you so you could see my number."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, cool. Thanks for the call."

She hung up. Then took the keyholder and admired it again. She sure was going to use it.

She went to check up on KG and he was already ready. They went downstairs to have some cereal and fruit, then left. And Sthandiwe made sure to put her keys on her new keyholder.

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They got to the venue and it looked beautiful. Sthandiwe hadn't seen the decor the day before, it hadn't been done yet. But now it was done, with the subtle theme colours. It was simple yet classy, elegant. The reception was also going to be in the same venue so the setup was done to accommodate that. And Sthandiwe and all her friends, including Chris, were sharing the same table.

Palesa and the rest of the bridesmaids looked beautiful in their lilac dresses, the groomsmen also looked great in their suits and so was Muzi. But of course, they had nothing on Sihle. She looked amazing as she walked down that aisle to KG's song. Her ivory gown looked perfect on her. And KG's song was perfect for her grand entrance. It was a piano song that started off slow then built up to a crescendo. He had written it specially for the occasion. And called it "Over and over again". It was about choosing your partner over and over again, through all life's ups and downs. The guy has a beautiful singing voice that could sweep you off your feet, so even on that day he didn't disappoint. He sang the song so beautifully.

Everything went well, and Sthandiwe found herself tearing up as she watched the couple exchange their vows for the second time. It was such a beautiful thing to watch. But she couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever get a chance to be at the altar too, to say her own vows to her man.

Anyway, after everything was done, after the speeches, she got her chance to get up on that podium for her own speech.

-Sthandiwe: "Today Sihle and Muzi are celebrating their 5th wedding anniversary. But this is their 10th year together. It's really been a long road for you two. And of course, there have been some speed bumps along the way but you both held on. You are still holding on because you love each other... I remember back in varsity I'd look at you two and wish to God I had what you have. And honestly, I still do. I don't know if I'll ever find it but I really hope one day I will."

As she said that, she found Chris looking at her, shaking his head. She just smiled and continued.

-Sthandiwe: "I fought to be here today, literally. I just couldn't miss this celebration. I had to be here to witness my favourite couple exchanging their vows once again... And to celebrate with you guys, KG and I decided to do another song for you. Our own rendition of Vince Gill's 'Look at Us'. Everybody, I chose this song because it's the same song that Muzi played for Sihle on his music player the day he proposed to her. At least that's what they told me, I wasn't there."

She said the last sentence laughing. And the crowd followed suit.

-Sthandiwe: "And of course, the lyrics fit perfectly... I wish you guys many more years together. May God continue to bless your marriage."

It was then that KG got up on that stage with his guitar and Sthandiwe stopped talking and went to the piano. It was time for the attendees to hear the song.

They, without a doubt, did justice to the song. But what got the crowd up to their feet and made them cheer was when Sthandiwe incorporated a rap verse after the song's second verse which was sang by KG. Okay, anyone who knew her knew that she was no rapper, only KG was, hence they got surprised when she rapped. And people knew that the original song has no rap verse. Which is exactly why Sthandiwe did it, she wanted something different. And it worked. By the time they finished, people were clapping non-stop. And that felt good. But what made Sthandiwe feel great was being on stage with KG again. It really felt good, just like old times. She was smiling as she went to sit down. Being back home was really good.

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But what happened next was something she didn't expect. Chris went up on that stage and did the unexpected.

-Chris: "Okay, Sihle, maybe you're gonna want to kick my behind for this, but before you do that just know that I already talked to Muzi yesterday and he said it's cool."

He said that smiling. Sihle just smiled too, not sure what he was talking about. Even Sthandiwe was also thinking, 'what the hell is he doing?'

-Chris: "I'm not up here to talk about you two, most people have done that already. I'm up here because I'm in love too. I'm in love with this beautiful woman. She's beautiful inside and out. She's strong, selfless and she loves fiercely... She's amazing and I just can't help but fall in love with her every day. I'm talking about you, Thandi. Please come up here again, sthandwa sam."

Okay, she didn't expect that, but she went anyway.

-Chris: "I'm doing this for the second time. I'm proposing to you for the second time because the first time I became foolish and broke off the engagement. But that's never gonna happen again. I never wanna lose you again, sthandwa sam, because truth is I don't know who I am without you. I want you by my side today and always... I'm in this for the long haul, babe. I'm gonna ride this wave with you all the way to the beach. And by beach I mean cemetery, because only death will take me away from you now."

He said that taking out the same engagement ring he proposed with the first time. But he didn't go down on one knee this time around.

-Chris: "So, for the second time, Sthandiwe Blie, will you marry me?"

Sthandiwe was just dumbfounded. He had caught her by surprise but it sure was a nice surprise. And her answer was the obvious one.

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, sthandwa sam. Yes, I'll marry you."

She couldn't contain her excitement as she said that. To think that she was already thinking he had changed his mind about marrying her.

He put the ring on her finger, and no feeling beat that.

-Chris: "When you were up here you said you don't know if you'll ever find what Muzi and Sihle have. But now I'm telling you that you have it. And I promise to give you even more."

She was smiling from ear to ear, and the crowd was cheering, clapping. She couldn't believe he had just done that. She brought him closer to her and kissed him.

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As they walked back to their table she just had to say it.

-Sthandiwe: "Wow! You really caught me by surprise there."

-Chris: "But it was a nice surprise I hope."

-Sthandiwe: "Of course, of course. I'm happy."

She found what he did really special, proposing to her in front of all those people.

They sat down at their table, and received a thousand "congratulations" from their friends and others at the table.

But the re-engagement made Sthandiwe think about the lobola and her family back in Grahamstown. She felt bad about not calling them to tell them that she was back. She had been back since Thursday and it was now Saturday but still no phone call to them. Guess she was still not used to having them in her life.

She excused herself from Chris and went outside to make a phone call to her uncle. Her aunt was also there and they put her on speaker. They were happy to hear from her again. The last time they heard from her was in October of the previous year when she told them that she was going to Okinawa and that she would be back in January, but they didn't know that she was now back. They thanked her for the Christmas gifts she'd had sent to them in December and they all loved them, they added. They were really happy that she was back but what made them more happy was that she was getting married.

They had a nice conversation. They were sharing her excitement. But that smile and excitement faded on Sthandiwe as soon as she hung up, because she was seeing a Police van entering the venue. She didn't know what they were there for but knowing that she too hadn't exactly been on the right side of the law made her feel uneasy. She stood where she was and looked as the two Officers got out of

the van and approached the entrance of the hall. At the entrance they were met by the ushers. They told them what they were there for, who they were there for, and the ushers showed them the table the person they wanted was sitting at.

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Sthandiwe walked in when they were reaching her table. But they weren't there for her. They were there for:

-Police: "Kagiso Phiri."

-KG: "Yes?"

He said that already getting up to his feet.

-Police: "You are under arrest."

-KG: "What? What for?"

-Police: "For the murder of Kate Smith."

Kate, Reneé's mother. KG closed his eyes, screwed. Then he put his wrists together for the Officer to handcuff him. He didn't resist, there was no point. Sthandiwe was standing by the entrance, watching. She lifted her hands to her head and let her tears fall as KG was being read his rights. She didn't see this coming. No one did. But as the Police passed by her with KG she acted strong, for him.

-Sthandiwe: "Don't worry, I got you, gazi. I got you."

KG just nodded as the Police took him away. Sthandiwe went back to her table, where her friends were. Palesa was distraught. And so were the others.

-Sthandiwe: "Guys, stay here, I'm gonna take care of this."

But Palesa just had to be dramatic.

-Palesa: "No. KG is my boyfriend. If anyone should help him it's me."

-Sthandiwe: "And no one is disputing that, Palesa. I just didn't want y'all, especially you, to leave Sihle on her day. But if you want to come with me then it's okay let's go."

They walked away.

-Sthandiwe: "I want to go tell MaKhumalo about this in person. Then I'm gonna get KG a lawyer, or you can do that if you want."

-Palesa: "No, go ahead."

This woman. Didn't she just say she wanted to help?

-Palesa: "What do the police have on KG anyway? How did they know that it was him?"

-Sthandiwe: "I wouldn't know."

She said that getting in her car. Palesa got in on the other side and they drove to Palmridge to talk to MaKhumalo.

And Sihle's day was ruined just like that. All that fun was spoiled. That's life for you.

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On the way to Palmridge.

-Palesa: "You know what's funny, Thandi? It's that you like 'helping out' after you have caused the damage. In my world that's not called helping out, it's called cleaning up your mess."

-Sthandiwe: "What are you talking about now, Palesa?"

-Palesa: "Kagiso is in this shit because of you, Thandi. That's what I'm talking about. And now you're acting as if you're helping him. No, you're doing this to ease your guilt."

-Sthandiwe: "Now you're talking crap, Palesa. That's bullshit and you know it. KG didn't kill Kate for me. He killed her because he was heartbroken over his daughter's death and he wanted someone to blame. And that someone became Reneé because he felt if she hadn't taken me that day I would have been able to help him move his daughter to a private hospital, which would have increased her chances of survival. That's why he killed Kate. He killed her to make Reneé pay. So how was I involved in that?"

-Palesa: "All I'm saying is you're cursed. Everyone around you gets burned, Thandi. I felt the heat and so did Chris. And you still have the courage to give him your car. Do you remember what happened to me when you gave me your car? What, you want my brother dead?"

Okay, now she was pissing Sthandiwe off. But she had no time for her crap, she had more important things to worry about. She just jumped the yellow line and pulled over.

-Sthandiwe: "Perhaps you should get out of my car right now. You can take a taxi to wherever you wanna go to help your man. I mean we wouldn't want you to die in my car now, would we?"

-Palesa: "Fine. I'm getting out."

She got out. Sthandiwe left her there, standing by the road, near Aspen Hills, and continued driving to Palmridge.

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But when she got to MaKhumalo, she learned that the news she was bringing was old news. The police had already been there looking for KG, with a search warrant. And upon searching his backyard flat they found a hot gun. And it was MaKhumalo who told them where KG was. Even though that infuriated Sthandiwe, she couldn't show it - out of respect. She just couldn't understand why MaKhumalo couldn't just say she didn't know where her son was. Yes, the police would have gotten to him eventually but they wouldn't have ruined Sihle's ceremony. And they sure as hell wouldn't have embarrassed KG by arresting him in front of so many people the way they did.

And also she didn't understand why KG still had a hot gun in his flat. She thought he gave her all his guns. Why did he keep that one? Why? But as messed up as that was, she had to forget about it and focus on getting her brother out of the hellhole he was in. So she left MaKhumalo and went to meet up with a lawyer.

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On Tuesday, the lawyer got KG out on bail. As it turned out, it was the guy that he handed the motorbike to, to destroy, that had rolled over on him to the police. The guy was a panelbeaters shop owner and KG knew him very well. The deal was that he would take the motorbike apart but evidently he didn't. And KG also became too trusting, to his own detriment, he told the guy why he wanted the motorbike destroyed. And the guy used that against him. Apparently, a week before the arrest he had asked KG to do a job for him. A carjacking job. And when KG refused, he threatened to expose his secret. But KG just called his bluff. Big mistake. The guy followed through on his threat. And now KG was in a deep hole.

The gun that was found in his flat was the same gun he used to kill Kate. So now the police had the murder weapon, the motorbike that was caught on camera fleeing the scene, and a witness - the owner of the panelbeaters shop - that knew the rider of the motorbike that day to be KG.

It was really not looking good for KG, and the lawyer told them that much. And Anthony Parker, Renee's father, sure wasn't going to make things easy for them either. He was there in court and he told KG right to his face that he was going to make sure that he goes down for murdering his ex-wife and that he was going to make his life a living hell. Okay, they never thought he would do that, they never thought he cared about Kate. But here he was. Whatever made him care all of a sudden was definitely not good for KG and his team.

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After he was released, Palesa took him to her apartment. Sthandiwe, Chris, Xolisa and Sihle also came by. Palesa had gotten rid of her dramatic bullshit towards Sthandiwe, and that was good.

The members of the "Strong Six" were all under one roof, working together towards a common goal, just like old times. And that would have been nice if the goal was something beautiful than trying to keep one of them out of jail.

They sat on the couches in Palesa's tiny lounge brainstorming ways to get KG free. Illegal ways, of course. Because the legal side was being taken care of by the lawyer. A lawyer that wasn't so optimistic about the case. So it was just clear to them that their friend was going to end up behind bars.

Sthandiwe wasn't seated, she was on her feet, leaning on the wall not far from the front door. She quietly watched as her friends exchanged their ideas. That was just beautiful, seeing them working together again like that. She was impressed by their sense of loyalty. But their ideas? Not so much. They were either impractical, stupid, or risky. They were even talking about taking the stupid witness out of the equation. Seriously?

They went on and on until they wanted to hear Sthandiwe's views.

-Xolisa: "Thandi, what do you think?"

He said that lifting his head to look where Sthandiwe was standing. But she was gone.

-Chris: "Where's she?"

-Sihle: "But she was just here."

Chris took his phone to call her.

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It rang in her pocket as she sat on the driver's seat of her car downstairs on the street, drained. She took it out and saw that it was Chris. She hesitated but ended up answering.

-Sthandiwe: "Motaung."

-Chris: "Baby, where are you? Why didn't you tell us that you were leaving?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I just wanted to step out and catch some fresh air. I was suffocating in there."

-Chris: "Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, but y'all don't need to wait up for me, I ain't coming back. I just need some air. See you later at my place?"

-Chris: "Okay. Later."

She hung up before he could say anything more. She just wanted to get away from them, she couldn't listen to their ideas anymore.

She rested her head on the steering wheel, stressed. The lawyer she had hired was good but was not optimistic that he would win the case. And Parker wasn't going to make things easy either. So what was going to happen? She didn't know but what she knew was that she would not let her best friend that she had come to consider as a brother go to jail. She had to come up with something. As she sat there thinking, her cellphone rang again. It wasn't Chris this time around, it was Patrick. He had stopped using a private number and Sthandiwe now had his number because he had texted her as promised on Saturday.

She answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey."

-Patrick: "Hey. How's it going?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm good. You?"

-Patrick: "No, you're not good. I can hear it in your voice. Don't lie to me. What's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, you're right, I ain't okay."

She told him what was going on. Everything.

-Patrick: "So the cops think this is an open-shut case. But it's not. I wish I was working it, I'd find the loopholes in the prosecutor's case. KG was gonna walk free...But hey, I can't just come over there and work the case."

-Sthandiwe: "I wish the lawyer I got for him was as confident as you are, hey. How about you consult for him?"

-Patrick: "Nah, that wouldn't really work. Our laws aren't exactly the same as yours over there."

-Sthandiwe: "I hear you. But I gotta find a way to help him. He doesn't deserve to go to jail, Rick, he doesn't. Everything was going so well for him and now this had to happen. No, I can't let him go down."

-Patrick: "I know you'll figure something out. You will."

-Sthandiwe: "I hope so. Anyway, I gotta go, Rick. I'm not exactly good for a conversation today."

-Patrick: "Okay. Talk some other time then."

She hung up and immediately dialled Sean's number. She didn't even know if he was in the country but she had to try. And luckily he answered.

-Sean: "Tee. Is that you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, Sean. Where are you?"

-Sean: "I'm home. Hey, the last time I heard from you was from that voicemail you left me last year saying you'd be out of the country for some time. I tried to call you back later that day and indeed your phone was already off as you said it would be. So where were you?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okinawa. But that's a story for another time. I need to see you. Mind if I come over?"

-Sean: "No, no. You can come. I'm home doing nothing."

That was good. She hung up. And started her car immediately and drove to Glenvista.

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She got to Sean's home and he let her in. He was home alone and after the greetings and hugging, he got down to business.

-Sean: "I know you aren't here just to see me, so out with it. What's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: "You're right. I need a favour from you... A friend of mine needs to disappear, so he needs a passport. You have the contacts, I have the money. So can you make it happen?"

-Sean: "Who wants to disappear?"

-Sthandiwe: "You know I can't tell you that, Sean."

-Sean: "Now that's funny considering the fact that you need my help... But it's cool, I'll hook you up. But hey, my guy is good but there are two things he can't fake. Passport photos and fingerprints."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll get you those, no worries."

She left shortly after that.

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She got in her car and called Patrick, but it rang unanswered. She dialled again and this time he answered.

-Patrick: "Hey. I'm sleeping. What's up?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, I woke you. But do you remember when you said whenever I need help I should just shout?"

-Patrick: "Yeah, of course."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now consider me shouting... I don't think KG is gonna win this case, Rick. I think his only way out of this is to just disappear. And that's where you come in."

-Patrick: "You're not saying what I think you're saying. Are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know what you think I'm saying but I'll tell you this much, I want KG to jump bail and never come back. I want him to go start afresh in another country. You managed to be in hiding for six months, Rick, because you are connected around the world. And it's those connections that I need."

-Patrick: "Are you sure about this, Tee?"

-Sthandiwe: "I am but I haven't talked to KG about it yet."

-Patrick: "Okay, look... I can't help you personally because I never disappeared forever, but I know someone who can help you. A guy who was my late brother's colleague. They were both SEALs but he left the Navy years ago. Now he does a lot of things and one of those is to help people who want to... 'disappear'. But he doesn't come cheap."

-Sthandiwe: "Money is not a problem, not when my brother is concerned."

-Patrick: "Okay, I'll give the guy a call in the morning and take it from there."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, Rick."

-Patrick: "But I hope you know that once KG leaves you can never talk to him again."

-Sthandiwe: "Really?"

-Patrick: "Yes. You won't even know where he is, I won't either. He'll disappear, really disappear."

Okay, now that was something Sthandiwe didn't think would happen. She just wanted him to leave the country, not leave her life for good.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, now that's gonna be difficult."

-Patrick: "It's for the best. Tee, look, KG's gonna disappear but you're not. If the police would follow you, track your calls, you could lead them right straight to him. And you would never forgive yourself if that happened. Because he'd be brought back home to face the original charges plus jumping bail. And you'd also be in for aiding and abetting a fugitive."

-Sthandiwe: "I hear you. Zero communication it will be."

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That was it. She drove back to Palesa's apartment, to talk to KG. She found him and the others still there and she told him what his option was. Even though it was difficult for him to comprehend at first, the more he let it sink the more he saw it as his only option. Anthony Parker was not going to let him have a normal life again. So disappearing was his best choice. But Palesa wouldn't have it. She didn't want her man to leave her.

-KG: "I don't like this either, babe. But what other choice do I have? I can't go to prison, Lisa. The three nights that I spent in that holding cell were rough enough, now imagine spending years and years in prison for murder. I can't do that."

-Palesa: "Okay then, I'm coming with you."

-KG: "Huh?"

Chris lost it. He didn't want his sister to leave her family behind and go to God knows where.

-Palesa: "Chris, I'm doing this. I can't let Kagiso leave me to raise this baby alone."

-KG: "What baby? You're pregnant?"

-Palesa: "Yes. I was still going to tell you."

That was a shock to all of them, including KG. But his excitement quickly trumped that shock.

Now that explains her moods and the bitchiness. Sthandiwe thought to herself.

They were shocked but not as shocked as her parents. But that shock gave way to anger when she told them that she was leaving with KG. They didn't want their daughter to leave, especially not with a murderer. But Palesa wasn't asking them, she was telling them. She told them that she was an adult and that she was going to do what she wanted, and what she wanted was to go and start afresh somewhere else with her man, the father of her baby.

MaKhumalo also didn't want KG to leave. He is her first born. And since her husband died years ago, KG became the man of the house, helping her raise his two little boys. So the thought of him leaving her was just too much. But KG tried to make her understand that leaving would be better than going to prison. She listened and finally gave in. But Palesa's parents on the other side were still not budging.

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On Wednesday, KG decided to go to Rustenburg to talk to his uncles. He wanted to do the right thing, to marry Palesa. Hoping that by doing so her parents would finally give them their blessings.

Sthandiwe contributed a huge chunk to the lobola money and KG's uncles paid the Motaungs a visit to pay the damages and to sit for lobola negotiations on Saturday of that same week.

Even though Palesa's parents didn't like the idea at first, they finally gave in. They accepted the lobola. And on Saturday of the following week, Palesa and KG had a big traditional wedding in Rustenburg. Sthandiwe, Sihle and Xolisa were there to celebrate with their friends. MaKhumalo, Chris and his parents also attended, obviously. The wedding was a huge success, even though it was only organised in one week. But even so, it wasn't everything Palesa could have wanted. But it was enough, because everything went well, she got welcomed to the Phiri family as a MoTswana bride

and that was enough. She was now the wife of a man she loved, and nothing beat that. When their friends left to go back to Jo'burg they were the happiest couple ever.

They spent the weekend in Rustenburg but on Tuesday they had to say their final goodbyes and go back to Jo'burg too.

Their friends threw them a small farewell party at Xolisa's, because the following day, on Wednesday, they were leaving. Instead of an idyllic honeymoon they were leaving for good. Sean's guy had come through with both their fake passports. And Patrick's guy was also standing by.

Palesa's parents had accepted that their daughter was leaving and MaKhumalo had also accepted that her Kagiso was leaving her. But to the other members of the Strong Six it was still hard to accept. They tried to have fun in that party but who were they fooling? They were hurt. But not as hurt as they were when they had to leave them at the airport. They were going to fly to Brazil then Patrick's guy was going to meet them there and take them to where he was going to help them start a new life with new identities. They didn't know where that would be and that made them a little uncomfortable but not knowing was the only way they could be safe - from being prosecuted and from the powerful Anthony Parker. And Patrick's guy could be trusted, so no worries there. Sthandiwe was bankrolling the entire thing, leaving no trail behind, thanks to Patrick's guy. So KG and Palesa were going to be fine wherever they were going to settle until they could get on their feet.

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Saying goodbye was just painful, especially for Chris and Sthandiwe, because they were both losing their siblings.

But the pain of saying goodbye was written in all their faces and it was evident in their eyes. However, it wasn't just pain in Sthandiwe's eyes, there were tears too. She just couldn't help but cry. The pain of being left behind by the only brother she had ever known was just too much. But it was better than to see him roughing it out in prison. She gave him a tight hug, knowing that chances of them ever seeing each other again were slim to none.

-KG: "You're the only sister I've ever had, ST. And I want you to know that wherever I will be, I'll be thinking about you everyday... Here, take this."

He said that taking his wristwatch off. And he put it in her hand.

-KG: "Keep it... Whenever you look at it, you'll know that I'm thinking about you."

She couldn't say anything, because she knew that her voice would just crack and she didn't want that. So she just nodded.

-Palesa: "Chomi, I know that I apologised already but I feel like apologising again. I became nasty and said some unforgivable things to you two weeks ago. I'm so sorry."

Sthandiwe took a deep breath and forced herself to speak.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, you apologised. So don't worry about it. I know that it's the pregnancy that was..."

-Palesa: (cutting her off) "No, that's no excuse. I became a bitch and I'm really sorry... You were right, you always come through for your friends. You've come through for us even now. You've come through for me just like you said you would. You have given me an opportunity to raise my baby with its father. You have spared me the pain of having to visit him in prison. And I can't thank you enough for that."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't mention it. Really."

Palesa came to her and gave her a hug.

-Palesa: "I wish you and Chris the best. Too bad we won't be there for your wedding but just know that in spirit we will be here... You guys deserve all the happiness in the world."

Sthandiwe wanted to smile but she couldn't, not through the pain she was feeling inside. So she just forced the smile. Then went to KG. She pulled him into an embrace again and held onto him tight, and he also did the same. They finally pulled apart and shared their unique handshake.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you, bro."

-KG: "I love you too. And goodbye, gazi... Chris, please take care of her. Don't ever hurt her."

-Chris: "Don't worry, she's in good hands."

That was her cue to leave, the lengthy goodbyes were just going to kill her. She left them there and went back to her car. She sat behind the wheel and cried out loud. Moments later, Chris got to the car and found her sobbing loudly. He sat next to her in the passenger seat and pulled her into his embrace, trying to comfort her without saying a word. Finally he spoke.

-Chris: "I think you should let me drive. You can't drive in this state."

He was right. So they swapped seats. And he drove them back home. Sihle and Xolisa rode behind in Xolisa's car. He was going to drop her off at her house, then go home.

They were the only ones left now. The Strong Six was dead for good, nothing was ever going to bring it back to life. And that was painful. But hey, all good things come to an end.

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When they got home, Sthandiwe just threw herself on the couch while Chris went to make them something to eat in the kitchen. She was just drained and heartbroken.

She took KG's watch out of her pocket and stared at it. All the memories they ever shared together came flooding back. And the last that came to her mind was when they sang together at Sihle's vow renewal ceremony. She remembered how happy she was, little did she know that it was their last time ever doing that together. She found tears trickling down her cheeks again. But her train of unhappy thoughts got derailed by a doorbell. She wiped the tears off and went to open.

-Sthandiwe: (shocked) "You?"

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Who do you think Sthandiwe found on her doorstep?

Insert #92

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Sthandiwe's visitor got surprised that she knew him.

-The Guy: "So you know who I am? Are you Sthandiwe?"

-Sthandiwe: "You can play dumb all you like. But, pretty boy, listen here, I don't forget no incident and I certainly don't forget faces."

She said that already grabbing him by his collar and dragging him inside. She was quick and violent. She pressed him against the wall, with her arm wedged under his throat, choking him.

-Sthandiwe: "About three weeks ago I bumped into you at the airport and now you're at my house. What do you want from me?"

It was evident from her voice that she was pissed. And she was pressing harder on his throat.

Chris was in the kitchen but he heard the commotion and came in a hurry.

-Chris: "Baby, what's going on?"

-Sthandiwe: "This motherfucker needs to tell me why he's been following me. (to him) Who the fuck are you?"

She asked already throwing him down. Then she got on top of him, pressing both his arms under her knees and threw two mean punches on his face.

Ever since she came back from Ireland she had been paranoid. And the fact that this guy caught her at a very bad day didn't help either.

-The Guy: "Please stop. I'm your cousin, Brendan Martin."

Sthandiwe was about to throw another punch but she stopped herself inches from his face when he mentioned that he was her cousin.

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean you're my cousin?"

-Brendan: "Your mother Anne Adkins was my mother's sister. My mother's maiden name is Emma Adkins."

He was talking fast, scared. Sthandiwe got off of him. She knew that her mother had a sister named Emma but she didn't know her. She never saw her or even talked to her before.

-Sthandiwe: "Why are you here?"

Brendan got up, catching his breath.

-Brendan: "I... I've always known that I have a cousin here so when my job moved me down here I thought I should look for you. I knew your name but I didn't know how you look like and even when I searched for you on social media I couldn't find you... During that airport encounter I didn't even know who you were. And I had already forgotten about it until you mentioned it just now."

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry for punching you. Follow me."

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They all went to the lounge and sat down.

-Sthandiwe: "Show me your ID."

-Brendan: "What?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not gonna repeat myself again. Your ID, now."

Chris looked at her with disapproving eyes but she ignored him. Brendan took out his passport and showed it to her. He was really Brendan Martin.

-Sthandiwe: "How did you find me?"

-Brendan: "My mother had your mom's address in Hyde Park. Friday last week I went there but I found a 'For Sale' sign. I called the real estate agent and she told me who was selling the house. And it wasn't you. Yesterday I met up with the seller and it turned out he's your lawyer. And he's the one who gave me this address."

-Sthandiwe: "Without my permission. He handed my address over to a stranger and didn't even tell me about it. How professional."

-Brendan: "I'm sorry."

-Sthandiwe: "Just take out your phone and video call your mother right now. And don't even think about saying 'what?'. Just do as I say."

He did as she asked. He video called his mother and she answered on the third ring. She confirmed what Brendan had just said, that she was her aunt. And it was only then than Sthandiwe became sure. But what convinced her the most was the fact that the woman looked just like her late mother. They really were sisters. However, it still didn't become a happy reunion. As soon as she got the confirmation she grabbed Brendan's phone and ended the call.

-Brendan: "Hey, why'd you do that? Don't you want to hear more?"

But she had no time to answer that.

-Sthandiwe: "Where are you staying right now, Brendan?"

-Brendan: "A hotel in Sandton."

She didn't even say why she was asking, she just got up and went to the kitchen. A moment later, she came back with a notepad and a pen.

-Sthandiwe: "Write down the name of the hotel you're staying in and your phone number."

He did.

-Sthandiwe: "You can go now. I'll call you when I want to talk to you."

-Chris: (disapproving) "Baby."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, please. Brendan, I'll call you."

Brendan got up and left, disappointed. That wasn't the welcome he had expected.

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-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, did you really have to treat him that way? He's your cousin."

-Sthandiwe: "Do I look like someone who even remotely cares about that? I don't care about those people, Chris."

-Chris: "And why are you talking like that? The guy is trying."

-Sthandiwe: "Did you hear what he said? His mother had my mom's address all this time but she never bothered to come. And did you hear that the very first moment he said anything about my mother he talked about her in past tense, meaning they knew that she was dead all this time. But they never bothered to come and pay their respects. That's because they don't care, Chris. So why should I? And this Brandon only looked for me because his job has already brought him to the country. He didn't come here for me. They all don't care about me. And truth is I don't care about them either."

-Chris: "So you're not gonna call him?"

-Sthandiwe: "He'll be lucky if I did. I have more important things to worry about, Chris. And speaking of, I need to get going."

She said that already getting up.

-Chris: "Where are you going? Important things like what?"

-Sthandiwe: "Like finding Alizwa."

And with that she made for the steps, going upstairs. That shocked Chris. Why would she want to find Alizwa? For a moment he was stumped. Then he rushed after her.

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He blocked her way up the stairs.

-Chris: "Why do you want to find Alizwa?"

-Sthandiwe: "Tell me, why did my parents die?"

That question confused Chris, but he answered anyway.

-Chris: "Because they got involved in a car accident."

-Sthandiwe: "What caused the accident?"

-Chris: "Your father jumped red robots. Why are you asking me this?"

-Sthandiwe: "He jumped the damn red robots because the breaks of his car wouldn't work, right? They didn't work because of Mason. He wanted my father dead. But if my father had killed him immediately after finding out that he had moved from being his friend to being his enemy, after finding out that he was the one behind my kidnapping, him and my mother would still be alive today."

-Chris: "Where are you going with this?"

-Sthandiwe: "Why did KG find himself behind bars two weeks ago? It's because he told someone some sensitive information and got too relaxed after that. He trusted the guy and never even for one second think that the guy could turn on him one day... Both him and my dad left loose ends and they had to pay a steep price for that. I'm not about to do the same. Alizwa is a loose end I gotta tie up. I gotta tie it up right now before it becomes a problem."

-Chris: "What do you mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa's the only person who knows that I framed Reneé. And even though Reneé died that can still crawl up and bite me in the ass. I can't trust that guy to keep my secret. Especially now that I've built a very high wall between me and him. I gotta deal with him."

-Chris: "I hear you. When did he come back from Okinawa?"

-Sthandiwe: "Three weeks ago. He told me via text last week. I never replied."

-Chris: "So how are you gonna deal with him?"

-Sthandiwe: "Simple. Bullet between the eyes... You know, when I went to Okinawa I was feeling guilty because of all the people I killed. And I worked through that when over there. But being in Ireland, having to fight for my life once again taught me one thing. One thing and one thing only. That I gotta do anything and everything to protect myself. If it means killing 20 more people to do that, so be it."

-Chris: "Okay, let me get this straight. You're gonna go upstairs and get your gun out of the safe. The only gun that you have, and go shoot Alizwa with it. A registered gun, Thandi. Can't you see that you're not thinking straight?"

-Sthandiwe: "What do you want me to do, Chris? Do you have a better plan?"

-Chris: "I don't. But I'm sure there is a better plan than this... For example, how did you deal with Greg? You didn't kill the guy even though he knows that you're the one who killed his father. That's because you have something on him too."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, that's where the difference is. I have something on him but I don't have anything on Alizwa."

-Chris: "Okay, we'll think of something...together. But first you need to eat. The food I was prepping in the kitchen is ready."

-Sthandiwe: "I don't want food, Chris. I want Alizwa out of the way... today. And I'm gonna remove him."

-Chris: "You don't want food but you need it, Thandi. You know how you get when you're hungry. Baby, you're sick and what you have is serious. The loss of appetite, nausea, fatigue. And when you're hungry you get extremely hungry and you become dizzy with headaches, shakiness, weakness, blurred vision. Not to mention the fast heartbeat and anxiousness. I don't even know why you don't want to go see a doctor."

-Sthandiwe: "How was I going to go to the doctor when I was still dealing with this KG issue? I didn't have time for that. But now that it's sorted I'll go see the doctor. But first I need to deal with Alizwa."

-Chris: "We will deal with him, today. But eat first."

He took her hand and walked her back to the couches.

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He went to get the food and gave it to her. Then he excused himself, saying he needed to use the bathroom. But when he reached the bathroom he went straight to the medicine cabinet. He rummaged through until he found what he was looking for - sleeping pills. He returned downstairs to the kitchen and went to the fridge. He took a pitcher of juice out and poured some in a glass. Then he opened two sleeping capsules and added the contents into the juice. And he went to give it to

Sthandiwe. She was eating and she drank the juice. By the time she was finishing she was already feeling sleepy. Chris helped her lie down on the couch. And after she had completely passed out:

-Chris: "I'm sorry, babe, I did this because you're stubborn and because I care. I can't let you pave your way to prison. If anyone should pull that trigger it's me. That way I'll be the one to take the fall if the bottom drops off under our feet."

He stopped and shook his head.

-Chris: "Dangerous love."

Then he took her phone and tried to guess her lock pattern. And he got it right on the 9th try. He found Alizwa's number and texted him, "Hey. Can we meet? Where are you?"

He waited for a reply which came through shortly, "Sure. Come by. At my house in Houghton. It's mine now that Reneé is gone. But that's a story for another day. Can't wait to see you."

Chris shook his head after reading it.

-Chris: "I never liked you, dude."

He knew Alizwa's house and that's where he was going. He replied, "On my way now." Then he pocketed the phone and made his way to the front door. He grabbed the spare key on the table near the door and pocketed it too. Then he took out the other key that was in the door lock, walked out and locked the door. Making sure that when Sthandiwe woke up she couldn't go out. And he went to get her car out from the garage. He got in and called his Jo'burg friend, Sakhe.

-Sakhe: "Yo, what's up?"

-Chris: "Hey, do you still have that unregistered .45 of yours?"

-Sakhe: "Yes. Why?"

-Chris: "I want it. I'm coming to you now. You're home, right?"

-Sakhe: "Yeah."

He hung up and started the car.

He got to Sakhe's place and he gave him the piece, at a price of course. He made the transfer via cellphone banking and accepted the .45 automatic. He checked the action, hefted it for weight.

-Chris: "It's empty. What am I gonna do with an empty gun?"

Sakhe hesitantly handed him two empty clips and a box of Glazer ammo. He took them and left. Sakhe wanted to know what he wanted to do with it but he never told him. He went back to his car, well Sthandiwe's, and began loading the clips. Then he took one loaded clip and slammed it into the butt of the .45. He jacked the slide back and let it slam home - chambering a round.

-Chris: "Best outcome would be to walk out of that house without pulling this trigger."

He put the gun aside, started the car and took off.

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He got to Houghton and Alizwa let him in. Probably because he just saw Sthandiwe's car and didn't check who the driver was. Chris drove up the long driveway and went to park in front of the house. He took the gun on the seat and tucked it under the waistband of his jeans. Then he got out of the car and walked to the front door. Alizwa opened, already pissed. He had already noticed that it wasn't the visitor he was expecting, but it was someone he hated.

-Alizwa: "Christopher, what are you doing here?"

Chris pushed him out of the way and walked inside.

-Chris: "I want us to talk about Thandi."

-Alizwa: "What's there to talk about? You've won. You have her, I don't."

-Chris: "Could you please be a grown up even for a minute? You helped Thandi frame René last year. But when things take another route no one would be able to prove your involvement and you can throw Thandi under the bus. So I'm here to make sure that never happens."

-Alizwa: "So you lied, you pretended to be her just so you could come here and talk about this?"

-Chris: "Yes. Now do we have an agreement?"

-Alizwa: "Thandi and I are no longer together, she's with you now, and I've accepted that. But truth is, I will always love her. That said, I'd never do or say anything to get her into trouble. So rest assured, no one would ever know what really happened with René. You have my word."

-Chris: "I don't know what your word is worth but I'd like to think it's worth a lot. Therefore, I'm gonna choose to trust you and walk away. Bye, Alizwa."

And with that he walked to the door. But Alizwa pulled a gun from his waist and pointed it at him.

-Alizwa: "Not so fast."

He said that cocking the gun. Chris heard that noise and immediately knew what Alizwa was doing. He stopped but didn't turn around.

-Chris: (under his breath) "I wish you didn't do that."

-Alizwa: "I shot you once, trying to kill you but you survived. Now it's time for me to correct that."

-Chris: "So you're going to shoot me?"

-Alizwa: "And make sure you die this time around."

-Chris: "Then you're gonna have to look me in the eye when you pull that trigger."

He turned around and looked at him.

-Alizwa: "You made a mistake by coming here, Motaung. I saw that it was you the moment you hit the intercom and I thought here's an opportunity presenting itself. I'm gonna kill you and tell the cops that you came here with intentions to attack me. You're..."

But Chris didn't let him finish. He quickly went down and slid across the shiny, slippery marble floor to Alizwa's legs. He grabbed them and violently slammed him down on the floor. In all that Alizwa's gun went off, and the bullet hit the ceiling. But Chris knocked it off his hand and it landed afar. And he released fierce punches to his face, pinning his chest with the left hand. Then he took his gun out and punched the barrel straight into Alizwa's mouth. The barrel simply went through the teeth and in his mouth. It appeared he had made up his mind about what to do. Alizwa's eyes bugged out of his head, knowing that he was about to die. But Chris took the gun out of his mouth and got off of him.

-Chris: "I want you out of town and never come back."

And with that he made for the front door again.

-Alizwa: "I knew that you don't have it in you. And I ain't going nowhere."

On second thought Chris turned around with his gun in hand. He pumped him once, square in the chest, killing him instantly.

-Chris: "Guess you were wrong."

Then he went to stand over him.

-Chris: "And you were nowhere near innocent."

Then he searched the mansion for the surveillance camera DVR. He finally found it in the study and deleted every footage then disabled recording. Then he wiped every surface he touched in the house and left.

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But instead of driving back to Sthandiwe's place he drove home. He only went back to Sthandiwe's after 19:00. He got in and found Sthandiwe in the kitchen, standing by the window, looking outside to the backyard. She heard him coming in and she could feel him standing behind her.

-Sthandiwe: "What's going on, Chris?"

She asked without even turning around to look at him.

-Chris: "I'm sorry."

She turned around and looked at him. He could see it in her eyes that she was mad as hell.

-Sthandiwe: "What the hell were you thinking drugging me like that?"

-Chris: "I was thinking about you. Hell, FOR you. You were not thinking straight, babe. You needed someone to do the thinking for you. You were going to do something stupid, something that would

land you in prison. And I couldn't let that happen. I love you too much to see you behind bars, Thandi. So I did what I could do to prevent that from happening. I knew that I couldn't talk you out of doing what you wanted to do so I did the first thing that came to mind."

-Sthandiwe: "Where are you coming from now?"

-Chris: "I had to go deal with Alizwa myself."

Sthandiwe just stared at him. The anger in her eyes had still not subsided.

-Chris: "I really love your brown eyes but they get scary when you're angry. They are as scary now as they were when you gave us a lecture on loyalty Friday last week."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, y'all needed to hear that. Sihle, Palesa, Xolisa and you seem like you sometimes forget what loyalty is. I'm always loyal to you all, and loyalty is a noble thing but I couldn't let it blind me. What you all did to me last year was wrong and it needed to be addressed. But we're past that now. What I need to know right now is how you dealt with Alizwa."

He told her everything that happened in Houghton.

-Chris: "I did it to protect you. I did it to show you how loyal I am to you. Thandi, I'm all for you, sthandwa sam. Your problems are mine. Your world is mine. Whatever you do I'll always do it too. And I'll always protect you. If it means killing to do that, then so be it."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks. And you were right. I'm not thinking straight. I'm hurt because I'm never gonna see KG again, and that is messing with my head. That's why I need a break. I'm driving down to Eastern Cape tonight, my suitcase is already packed."

-Chris: "Driving? Why ain't you flying?"

-Sthandiwe: "Because I'll be there for a while and I don't wanna use a rental car during that period."

-Chris: "Then I'm coming with you. You know that you get those dizzy episodes, Thandi, so I can't let you drive alone."

-Sthandiwe: "You're coming with me? But what about your office in Cape Town?"

-Chris: "I've been here for three weeks and you never asked me about that. Why now?"

-Sthandiwe: "I never asked because I was so preoccupied with this KG thing."

-Chris: "I closed my office down. I'm moving back here. And I know you're gonna be mad because I didn't tell you about it, but please be mad later. Right now we gotta go to the Motaung house so I can pack my things."

Sthandiwe just shook her head and went to get her suitcase.

-Sthandiwe: "Alizwa's gone. Mmmh. My life took a major turn the day I met that guy. Yes, I know that he wasn't responsible for everything that happened after that up until now, but it started with him. My life got filled with drama after I met him. I don't even remember how it was like before all this drama. How it was like before I met him."

-Chris: "And not to mention that he shot us last year. He wasn't innocent. But let's forget about him and get going. And I'll get to use the Indian Ocean to dispose of the gun I used."

They walked out. And drove to Melrose.

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Chris went to pack his stuff and since they were already going to Eastern Cape, his father wrote a letter that Sthandiwe had to give to her uncle. It was addressing their intentions to pay lobola for her and asking for a date to start the negotiations.

Then the couple embarked on their journey. They both didn't know the way to Eastern Cape, they both had never driven there before. Worse for Chris, he had never even been there before. They made a number of wrong turns along the way even with the road directions right on their faces. But finally they made it to their destination. They got to Bongiwe's house in Alice around 11:00 the following day. Sthandiwe was happy to see her cousin again and she introduced her to Chris. Bongiwe is a people's person, she and Chris hit it off. But they had to cut the chat short because Chris and Sthandiwe were exhausted and hungry. She gave them food and a bedroom to rest.

They woke up around 16:00 and bathed then drove to Grahamstown.

On the way, Sthandiwe got a text on her burner phone, a R99 worth MTN phone with one of those already RICA'd sim cards you find in the streets of Jo'burg. She had bought it to organise KG's exit out of the country.

The message was from a number she didn't recognise, a Brazil number. And it read, "Congratulations on your engagement". She smiled and replied immediately before the number could be off service, "Thank you so much. I appreciate it". She knew that it was a text from KG telling her that they had gotten to Brazil safe and sound and that they had met up with Patrick's guy. It was a code only the two of them agreed on.

She told Chris that his sister was okay. Then moments later she called Patrick from the burner phone.

-Patrick: "Hey."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey. Now we're even."

He knew exactly what she was talking about.

-Patrick: "All good?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. Thanks, Rick."

-Patrick: "Don't mention it."

She hung up.

They got to Grahamstown and found Chris a nice B&B. Then she left him to settle in and drove to her uncle's house in Kingswood.

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Thandi got 7 years, but with good behaviour she could serve 4. It could have been worse but her lawyer (that her hubby forced her to retain) made a good case.

Insert #94

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Chris slowly sat on the bed next to Sthandiwe.

-Chris: "Baby, I can explain."

-Sthandiwe: "Please do, because I'm really interested in hearing your explanation for this."

She said that closing the laptop and putting it aside. She just couldn't look at that picture anymore.

Chris covered his face with both hands.

-Sthandiwe: "Please, start talking. Who's that woman? And please tell me the truth. I think you owe me that much."

He took a deep breath then removed his hands from his face.

-Chris: "That's Naledi. She was my personal assistant."

He looked down, paralysed by shame.

-Sthandiwe: "Your PA, just like Penny?"

-Chris: "Yes."

-Sthandiwe: "Except this one didn't seduce you. You were a willing participant."

-Chris: "It happened only once, sthandwa sam. You were on the other side of the world and I had tried everything to find you but I'd failed. And you had told KG that you were extending your stay over there. That hurt me. I thought you had moved on with your life. I thought you had moved on with Patrick. Because the owner of the Dojo Bar told me that you two were always together. So..."

-Sthandiwe: "So you decided to move on too."

-Chris: "Like I said, it only happened once. I didn't plan for it to happen. I was just not thinking straight."

-Sthandiwe: "You didn't plan for it to happen. It was a mistake, right?"

-Chris: "That's what I'm saying."

-Sthandiwe: "But you see, my problem with that is that you captured the moment. You have a pic of it. You wouldn't have done that if it was a mistake. You have a pic because you wanted the moment to last forever, isn't?"

-Chris: "I didn't take that pic, Thandi. I'm sure you've noticed that I'm asleep in it. She obviously took it when I was sleeping. Hell, I didn't even know that it was on my laptop."

-Sthandiwe: "And you expect me to believe that?"

-Chris: "It's the truth, babe. I wouldn't keep a pic like that, you know me. Hell, I'm too old for that...She must have transferred it to my laptop herself. She was my PA, Thandi. She would go into my office at any time and sometimes I leave my laptop unlocked."

--Sthandiwe: "It doesn't matter who took the pic or who saved it in your laptop, Chris. Fact is you slept or you still sleep with that woman. And I'm sure you know how that makes me feel."

-Chris: "I'm not sleeping with her, baby, please believe me."

Sthandiwe was calm all this time. Maybe it's because she wasn't angry but hurt.

-Chris: "There's more."

-Sthandiwe: "More what?"

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, I wanted to tell you this sooner. Believe me I wanted to. But I didn't know how to tell you and there was never a right time."

Sthandiwe's heart started beating faster, knowing very well that what she was about to hear was something worse than her fiancé sleeping with another woman.

-Sthandiwe: "I know that whatever it is it's going to hurt me. But I'm already hurt so you might as well finish what you already started."

He held her hand.

-Chris: "I'm sorry, sthandwa sam. I'm sorry for hurting you like this. I really am."

She yanked her hand off of his.

-Sthandiwe: "Just tell me already."

-Chris: "Last week she called me to tell me she's pregnant. I don't..."

She didn't let him finish. She couldn't.

-Sthandiwe: "What? She's pregnant?"

-Chris: "She says she is. And that it's mine. I don't know how true is that but it changes nothing between me and you."

Sthandiwe's heart sank. She had anticipated that what he was going to tell her was going to break her heart but she just didn't know how much. And it turned out to be too much. She climbed down the bed, her head spinning. She went to lean on the desk.

-Sthandiwe: "Another woman is pregnant with your baby yet you still went ahead and paid lobola for me without even telling me about it."

-Chris: "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. But like I said, this changes nothing between me and you, sthandwa sam. It shouldn't. I love you, Thandi, only you. I want a life with you. And if that baby is mine, I'll sure take care of it. And that's the only relationship Naledi and I would ever have."

-Sthandiwe: "You slept with this woman without protection and you came to sleep with me too without protection...I know I also did the same with Alizwa. But I never put your health at risk. You and I were always protected."

-Chris: "I told you, I wasn't thinking straight. I'm sorry."

-Sthandiwe: "Moving right along. I'm not mad, Chris. I'm not, I'm just hurt... I know that I'm not one to judge because I was also pregnant with another man's baby when I got engaged to you. You proposed to me knowing that I was, meaning you had accepted me with that baby. So I can't really be angry because it's the same script just with a different cast...You got together with this woman when we were not together. And I choose to believe you when you say it only happened once. But the fact that you kept it from me doesn't sit well with me. You are only telling me now because I have already seen the pic. Whatever happened to honesty in relationships? We are engaged for goodness sake, Chris. And not to mention that I'm now gonna be faced with baby mama drama before we can even say 'I do'. I really don't know how I feel about all this. I'm gonna need some time to let it sink. I hope you understand that."

-Chris: "I ummmh... I do."

-Sthandiwe: "I'll be in Alice."

And with that, she took her car keys and walked out. Leaving Chris burying his face in his hands.

Immediately when she got inside her car she let her tears fall. She was hurt but she didn't want to cry in front of Chris. Her happily ever after wasn't going to be exactly the way she had imagined it. Not with the baby mama in the picture.

She sat in her car crying until she heard a knock on her window. She looked, and it was Chris. But instead of rolling the window down for him, she started the car and hit the gas. Leaving him standing there.

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She drove straight to Alice. She didn't even go to her aunt's house to get her stuff, because she knew that she was already back from work and she didn't want to hear her noise. She had no energy for that.

Her car was flying on the road, she was just not feeling herself. Everything that was happening kept playing in her head and the more she thought about it the more her stress levels went up.

But as she was entering Fort Beaufort, she was brought back to earth by the ringing of her phone. She slowed down and checked the display. She answered with a smile despite everything.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, my love. How are you?"

-Minenhle: "Hey, I'm good. How are you?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm okay. How's Cape Town? The new job still treating you good?"

-Minenhle: "Yeah, great actually. I really like my new job."

Yeah, she was now working in Cape Town. Claire, Xolisa's girlfriend, got her a job and she had started two weeks earlier.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm glad to hear that, hon. I'm glad you're moving on. You're living your life again and that's amazing."

-Minenhle: "And the future is looking bright again... But listen, there's some information that I've stumbled upon. Info that I wanna share with you. In fact, it's about you."

-Sthandiwe: "What? What info? Tell me."

-Minenhle: "No. I'd rather tell you face to face. I'll be in Jo'burg tomorrow anyway. I'm taking the bus this evening. Xolisa's expecting me."

-Sthandiwe: "This info sounds serious and it's making me feel anxious. So much that I can't wait. I'm not even in Jo'burg right now, Minnie, I'm in EC. So can't you just tell me now?"

-Minenhle: "No, babe. Like I said, I'd rather tell you in person. Please be in Jo'burg tomorrow."

And with that she hung up.

-Sthandiwe: "Minnie? Minnie?"

But the line was dead. She didn't call her back, she just pressed the car to Alice. She sure was going to be in Jo'burg the following day. She really wanted to hear what Minenhle had to tell her.

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She got to Alice but her cousin, Bongwiwe, wasn't in. She parked her car in front of the house and reclined the chair so she could relax.

Bongiwe got back from work around 18:00 and found her passed out in her car. She tried to wake her up but she wouldn't wake up. That's when she realised that she wasn't sleeping, she was actually unconscious. She got her out of the car and laid her on her back on the lawn. Then she proceeded by giving her a knuckle rub to the sternum, before considering the hectic CPR. She knew what to do because she is a doctor.

What she did was sure enough to wake her cousin up. She woke up still dizzy, but what's important is that she was alive. She tried to talk but it was difficult so she only uttered four words.

-Sthandiwe: "Low...BP... and... sugar."

-Bongiwe: "Your eyes."

Sthandiwe looked confused.

-Bongiwe: "Never mind."

She carried her inside the house and went to lay her down on the couch. Then she went to the kitchen and came back with Coke. She made her drink it slowly, to raise her blood sugar. But she couldn't keep the Coke down, she was nauseated and she threw it all up.

Bongiwe went to the kitchen to get her some Zofran to help her with the nausea. And it worked. She then drank some apple juice and it stayed down. And her blood sugar eventually got raised and so was her BP.

Bongiwe sat down next to her and she told her about her sickness.

-Bongiwe: "From all the symptoms you're telling me about, including the itchiness of the skin and the yellowish eyes, I think you are hypoglycemic due to liver problem."

-Sthandiwe: "My eyes are yellow?"

-Bongiwe: "Yep."

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't notice that. And neither did Chris. But come to think of it, look..."

She displayed the interior of her hands, and they were yellowish too.

-Sthandiwe: "I noticed them earlier today. But I didn't think much of it."

-Bongiwe: "That's jaundice. Looks like your liver isn't functioning properly, but you'll need to have liver biopsy and some tests done to have a proper diagnosis."

-Sthandiwe: "My liver is not functioning properly? What could possibly cause that?"

-Bongiwe: "It can be caused by a number of things, your doctor will tell you which one is the likely cause in your case. Aren't you taking any medication that could cause it?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, no medication...This means I really have to be in Jo'burg tomorrow. I have to have those tests done ASAP and know how serious this is. I have to drive out tonight."

-Bongiwe: "Drive out? Alone? Hell no, not in this condition. Where's Chris?"

-Sthandiwe: "Still in Grahamstown. And I don't want him to drive me."

She didn't say anything more but Bongiwe could tell that there was something wrong between her and Chris.

-Bongiwe: "Everything okay between you and him?"

But Sthandiwe was still not ready to talk about what was going on, so she lied.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, everything's fine. It's just that he's still enjoying being here so I don't want to force him to drive me back home."

-Bongiwe: "Even though you're sick?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes. Will you please let it go now?"

-Bongiwe: "Sure. But you need to rest first. Let's go to the bedroom."

She took her to the bedroom and she fell asleep almost immediately. Bongiwe left her there and stepped outside to her car (Sthandiwe's). She took the car keys out of the ignition, locked the car and pocketed the keys. Then she went to her own car and got inside. But before driving off she called Chris, she had his number. She told him that she was coming to get him and asked which B&B he was staying in. When he told her, she hung and drove off.

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She got to Grahamstown and went straight to Chris' B&B. She told him what was going on and he agreed to go to Alice with her. They passed by her parents' house to pick up Sthandiwe's stuff then drove back to Alice. Her mother wanted an explanation of course. She wanted to know why Sthandiwe was leaving and when they told her, she understood.

They got to Alice and found Sthandiwe resting on the couch in the lounge watching TV. But as soon as she saw Chris she turned the TV off and looked at him, then at Bongiwe.

-Sthandiwe: "Why is Chris here, Bongi?"

Bongiwe didn't answer.

-Sthandiwe: "You took my car keys and left me immobile while you went on to get him? Bongi, I told you that I don't want him to drive me home."

-Bongiwe: "I heard what you said but as your cousin it is my job to make sure that you're safe. I couldn't let you drive to Jo'burg on your own."

-Sthandiwe: "I can't do this. Not now."

And with that she got up and went to the bedroom.

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Bongiwe was left looking at Chris.

-Bongiwe: "Something's going on between the two of you and I wanna know what it is. And don't you dare be like her and tell me it's nothing."

Chris just had to sit down before telling her what was really going on. She sat down too. And he told her everything.

-Bongiwe: "So this is what's going on? No wonder Thandi's like this. Chris, what you did..."

-Chris: (interrupting) "Please don't lecture me. Please... Look, I know that what I did isn't okay but I didn't cheat on her. I'd never cheat on her. Thandi and I weren't together when it happened."

-Bongiwe: "But point is, there's a baby on the way, Chris. And that changes everything. Sure you understand why she's reacting like this to this whole thing. Hell, of all people you should understand best. You broke up with her last year because of the father of her baby. Similar situation."

-Chris: "I know. I don't expect her to just accept this and move on with me as if nothing's happened. But I'd hate to lose her over this. Over a stupid mistake that only happened once. I love her, Bongi. I don't wanna lose her."

-Bongiwe: "Then make sure she sees that... I'll get you some blankets, you'll sleep on the couch because I only have two bedrooms here."

-Chris: "It's okay. Couch is okay."

-Bongiwe: "You'll have to drive to Jo'burg in the morning."

She went to get the blankets, gave them to him and went to sleep in her bedroom.

Chris made himself comfortable on the couch, if that's even possible, but he didn't fall asleep until after 23:00. Falling asleep was difficult knowing that Sthandiwe was in the other room probably awake because of the stress he was causing her.

Indeed, Sthandiwe was awake under those covers, crying. Even though she couldn't judge him but knowing that her man was having a baby by another woman hurt, really hurt.

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The next morning, on Wednesday, they got up early and got ready to leave. Sthandiwe called her doctor and made an appointment. Then they said their goodbyes to Bongiwe who, in an unfriendly tone, told Chris to fix his mess. Then they got in their car and Chris drove off.

Sthandiwe was still not ready to talk about what was happening. So they would just have small talk here and there. It was just an awkward drive.

And Sthandiwe kept trying to call Minenhle but her phone kept sending her straight to voicemail. She later decided to call her brother, Xolisa, and asked if his sister was already in Jo'burg. And his answer was no. He was expecting her around 12:00 but she didn't arrive. Okay that was weird but they both knew that Minenhle was an adult so she was probably going to turn up later.

Chris wouldn't let Sthandiwe drive, he drove until they got to Jo'burg.

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They got to the house around 21:00 and went inside. Sthandiwe turned the lights on but she didn't walk deeper inside, she just stood by the door. Her eyes moved around then she took a deep breath.

-Sthandiwe: "I didn't know that I'd be back here in just a week. I really wanted to stay away from this house for some time, you know. KG was staying here with me before he left, and he's still everywhere in this house. And being back here makes me miss him more."

-Chris: "You're talking as if the guy's dead. He's not dead, babe."

-Sthandiwe: "That doesn't really make a difference. I'm never gonna see him again."

-Chris: "Yes, you miss him. But you can't abandon your house because of that. Best way to deal with your fears is not to run but to face them head on."

That only made Sthandiwe think about their current issue.

-Sthandiwe: "You can take the car and drive home."

-Chris: "Okay, so this is you telling me that you don't want me around?"

-Sthandiwe: "What do you think, Chris? I told you that I need some space."

-Chris: "What does that even mean, Thandi? What does it mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "It simply means I need some space, some time to think things through."

He still didn't understand what that meant. But he didn't ask anymore.

-Chris: "Okay. I'll be home. Goodnight."

-Sthandiwe: "Night."

Seriously, there was no way she was going to sleep next to him, at least not yet.

She went straight upstairs to take a shower. And because she had already eaten on the way, after the shower she put on her PJs and went straight to bed. But before she could fall asleep she called Minenhle again but her phone was still off. She called Xolisa and he told her the same thing he had told her earlier, Minenhle was still nowhere to be found. Okay, now she was getting worried. But she didn't have much time to think about it. She was tired so she dozed off almost immediately after she hung up.

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She woke up in the morning and got ready to go to the doctor. But before she could leave, as she was still having breakfast, Chris arrived. She let him in even though she was in no mood to talk to him. She was really trying but every time she looked at him she'd see that pic of him in bed with another woman and she'd feel sick to her stomach.

-Chris: "Are you ready to go?"

He asked as he sat down next to her on the high chairs in the kitchen.

-Sthandiwe: "Ready to go where?"

-Chris: "To the doctor, of course. I'm taking you there myself."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, please, don't do this. I told you that I need some space. Why can't you respect that?"

-Chris: "No, I'm not gonna let you do that, Thandi. I'm not gonna let you do that to us. If this 'space' thing is your way of breaking up with me then you're not gonna succeed. I'm not gonna let you do that. No."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not breaking up with you, Chris. I only said I need space. Which part of that can't you understand?"

-Chris: "Well, I'm not giving you that either. Sthandwa sam, we can't fix our problems apart. This space thing is only gonna make things worse, it's gonna cause us to drift apart. And I don't want that. I love you, Thandi, and I don't wanna lose you. I am so...so...sorry for everything that's happening. If I could take that one stupid night back believe me I would but I can't. All I can do is to control the fallout. I'm not gonna let that mistake ruin what we have, babe, I won't. I love you too much to let that happen."

He was staring deeply into her eyes the whole time. And so was she. And she could see the sincerity in his eyes.

-Sthandiwe: "I love you too, Chris. You know I do but I can't...I can't..."

Her voice was breaking, and she couldn't finish the sentence, tears just fell. She really loved him and that's exactly why she was hurting so much.

He pulled her into an embrace and she gave in. She sobbed on his shoulder and he just held her tight.

-Chris: "I'm sorry, sthandwa sam, I'm really sorry."

She finally pulled back and looked at him. She really loved this man and there was no way she was going to let a mistake steal their happiness together. She understood that if the baby was really his then things would change, but they were going to have to work through all that together. For better or worse, right?

He wiped her tears off.

-Chris: "I love you."

-Sthandiwe: "I love YOU."

He pulled her closer and pecked her lips, which made her skin crawl, thinking about the fact that he kissed another woman with the same lips. But she concealed her feelings.

-Sthandiwe: "Let me go clean up my face then we can go."

-Chris: "Do that... I'm going to walk this journey with you, babe, until you recover. Okay?"

She nodded with a faint smile. Then went upstairs to clean up. When she was done they left.

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They got to the hospital and she got to see the doctor. Her blood was taken for the tests and she was going to start treatment only after the proper diagnosis was done, after the test results were back. But she was prescribed glucagon for her hypoglycemic attacks. Then the doctor recommended some lifestyle changes to help prevent further liver damage and to deal with the hypoglycemia. Then she and Chris left.

On the way, she got a call from Xolisa. And he wasn't the bearer of good news. He was calling to tell her that Minenhle had passed away. Apparently she was found in her flat dead due to overdosing on heroin. Shit! What? Immediately after she hung up she asked Chris to drive to Xolisa's place.

When they got there, they found her laying on the couch, staring up at the ceiling, clearly torn. After they passed their condolences he repeated what he had already told Sthandiwe on the phone, that his sister had committed suicide by overdosing.

-Sthandiwe: "No, XO, this doesn't make any sense. No sense at all. Minnie wasn't using, and she wouldn't commit suicide by OD'ing."

-Xolisa: "Well, clearly she was...using. Maybe the rape thing came back to her hard and she couldn't handle it."

-Sthandiwe: "That's not true, Xolisa, and deep down you know it. Minnie was moving forward with her life. She had a new job that she liked, and she was putting the rape thing behind. She even said it to me the day before yesterday, the day she supposedly killed herself, that the future was looking bright again. She was in a good space, the therapy was working... I'm telling you, XO, your sister didn't kill herself. If she wanted to kill herself she would have done that when the rape was still fresh and still eating away at her, not now."

-Xolisa: "But, Thandi, how do you explain the heroin syringe that was found in her arm when her body was discovered?"

-Sthandiwe: "Let's wait for the coroner's report before we believe that...XO, Minnie wanted to tell me something. She said it was important but she wouldn't tell me over the phone. She wanted to tell me in person. And I think that's what got her killed."

Xolisa chuckled.

-Xolisa: "What? Thandi, you watch too many movies. There's no such thing. My sister killed herself and that's it."

-Sthandiwe: "No, this doesn't make sense to me. And it shouldn't make sense to you either. Way I see it, XO, it's either you didn't know your sister at all or you're playing dumb. Minnie was happy and she was looking forward to building her life again. You saw how happy she was when Claire told her about the job she had gotten for her. It was an opportunity for her to start over and build her life again. She wouldn't kill herself. No, I disagree. And she wasn't using, I'm telling you. I know a user when I see one."

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Xolisa was still not singing from the same hymn sheet as Sthandiwe.

-Xolisa: "Just drop it, Thandi. Please. My sister killed herself. Her death has already been ruled out as suicide. Now stop. Stop with your theories, they're never gonna bring her back."

-Sthandiwe: "I know that Minnie was your sister, XO. But guess what, she was also my friend."

She effortlessly took her top off and showed him her back.

-Sthandiwe: "See this 7 on my back? Minnie is there too. And now that somebody out there has killed her and the police aren't doing anything about it I'm gonna take matters into my own hands. Whoever did this, I'm gonna hunt them down and they will regret doing what they did to her. I'm doing this, Xolisa, with or without you... Besides, if she really got killed because of what she was about to tell me then I owe it to her to find out what really happened. I'm doing this, buddy, whether you like it or not."

But before Xolisa could say anything Chris beat him to it.

-Chris: "Baby, you're physically sick. You can't go out there and play detective or superwoman, you're neither. You're an ordinary human being and you're sick. If you do this you could get yourself killed."

-Sthandiwe: "Tell me something I don't already know, Chris... I don't know about XO but it looks like you and I are going to Cape Town tomorrow. I need to know what happened to Minnie and you need to see this Naledi of yours, talk to her face to face and find out if the baby is really yours."

That caught Xolisa's attention.

-Xolisa: "What, you're a having a baby, bro?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh wow, not the same reaction or the look I got from you when you heard that I was pregnant with Alizwa's baby. What, is it because Chris is a guy?... Actually no, don't answer that."

She said that putting her top back on. Then:

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, you'll find me in the car. And oh, Xolisa, you were wrong. I don't watch a lot of movies. I'd love to though but I just never get the time."

And with that she walked out. Leaving Chris behind with Xolisa.

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She got to the car but she didn't get in. She just sat on the bonnet, her mind working. Minnehle's death had without a doubt hit her pretty hard. And she couldn't stop wondering what kind of information did she want to share with her or how it was connected to her murder.

Chris joined her some minutes later. He came to sit on the bonnet too, right next to her and folded his arms.

-Chris: "Are you sure you wanna do this?"

-Sthandiwe: "I did tell you about my childhood best friend that died of leukemia when I was 14, right?"

-Chris: "Yeah, I remember you mentioning her. Why do you ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "Her name was Amohelang and we were of the same age. We became friends in preschool then we went to the same primary school after that. She...she was always sickly but when we were doing grade 6 she got really sick, so sick that she couldn't go to school anymore. And getting a stem cell donor wasn't happening. So she spent the most of the next three years in hospital than she did at home... I watched her getting weaker and weaker and losing her hair because of chemotherapy, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was just a kid with no means to help her in any way. I felt so helpless and useless, and THAT was a torture to my little soul... She finally gave up the fight when she was supposed to be doing grade 9, at only 14."

-Chris: "So losing another friend reminds you of her? Minnie's death just took you back there."

-Sthandiwe: "With full force... I'm devastated now as I was devastated then. Amo's death hit me pretty hard. And the fact that I couldn't do anything to help her hit me even harder. That's why I made

a promise to myself that when I'm older I'd never feel so helpless again. That I'd always do anything and everything to help a friend."

-Chris: "So that's why you are like this now, so protective of your friends. I think I understand but..."

-Sthandiwe: (interrupting) "I couldn't do anything to help Amo. But I tried doing something after her death. I've been making donations towards the cause, to the Sunflower Fund, so that others like her can stand a better chance getting stem cell donors. And I even grew my hair in her honour. I've never cut it since I was 14 until last year. In my heart I was growing it for the both of us, me and her. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm gonna do the same for Minnie too. I'm not just gonna sit and fold my hands, I'm gonna do something even if it's after the fact. I'm gonna find out who killed her and I'm gonna make sure that they never take another life again."

Before Chris could respond to that, Sthandiwe's phone beeped, an incoming message. She took it out and checked the message. It was a message with a photo of a positive pregnancy test, with a caption "That's your fiancé's baby I'm carrying. Question is, can you give him one, bitch? Bitch, you better take a step back and let Chris and I raise this baby together."

She knew that it was from Naledi. But instead of getting angry she just felt sorry for her, for being so frigging pathetic. What Naledi was doing was something she always failed to understand. Why do some women see the need to fight another woman over a man? She just never understood that. If she personally saw a need to fight with anyone she would fight with Chris, not Naledi. He's the one who wronged her. So, to her, what Naledi was doing was just pure stupid and pathetic. But she showed Chris the message anyway.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure that's Naledi. Where does she get off sending me a message like that? Where did she even get my number?"

-Chris: "I don't know where she got your number from but it wasn't from me. I'm sorry she did this and I'm gonna talk to her, put her in her place. She has no business contacting you in any way."

-Sthandiwe: "Please talk to her because I know that this is just the beginning. From here things will only escalate and I'll find myself being called names daily. And I won't take kindly to that."

And with that she got inside the car.

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Chris hesitated but ended up following her inside. He sat behind the wheel and looked at her.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, I'm sorry about what just happened."

-Sthandiwe: "Stop saying sorry, you didn't send me the message."

-Chris: "This is happening because of me, that's why I'm apologising."

-Sthandiwe: "Don't apologise, just make sure it doesn't happen again."

-Chris: "I will. I promise."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now please take me home."

Without saying another word, Chris started the car and drove her home.

Her head was too busy with Minenhle's murder to entertain Naledi's bullshit any further.

She was still deep in thought when her phone rang. But she just checked the display and ignored the call.

-Chris: "Aren't you gonna answer that?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, I'll call him back later. It's Sensei from Okinawa."

-Chris: "You never liked using a song as your ringtone. Why now?...Oh, 'Hotline Bling', KG's favourite song. You put it on because you miss him."

-Sthandiwe: "Something like that."

-Chris: "That day at the airport you hugged him even though we had all agreed on no hugging."

-Sthandiwe: "I just couldn't help myself."

-Chris: "You know what he said after you left? He was like 'I have a confession to make. When I first met you guys, I never liked any of you. But as the time went by we all became this one big family. And now that Palesa and I are leaving I want you all to remain a family. To have each other's backs all the time. You need each other now more than ever.' And he was right."

-Sthandiwe: "He was?"

-Chris: "Yeah. And if you believe that Minnie is murdered then we'll get to the bottom of this together, you and me. Xolisa is hurt right now and he's not thinking straight. So we shouldn't listen to what he's saying, we just need to have his back. And having his back in this case would be to find out what really happened to his sister."

-Sthandiwe: "So you're with me?"

-Chris: "Always. I'll always take your side, babe, no matter what."

She smiled and brushed his shoulder.

-Sthandiwe: "Enkosi, sthandwa sam. [Thanks, my love.]"

-Chris: "Anytime."

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They got home and because she was tired, which was now a norm, she went straight to the bedroom to take a nap, while Chris remained downstairs watching TV. But before hitting the pillow, she texted

Sihle asking for a meet after work. She really missed her friend. Sihle replied with place and time. And after reading that reply, she hit the pillow.

She woke up around 16:00 and went downstairs, but she didn't find Chris, he was gone. She only got his note on the kitchen counter, next to a single red rose, asking her to please have dinner with him at a certain restaurant later. She smiled and texted him, taking him up on his offer.

Then she went back upstairs to take a shower, and got ready for her meet with Sihle. She got done pretty quickly and left.

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They met up at this restaurant around Auckland Park and shared a lingering hug. They hadn't seen each other in a week hey. Then they sat down, ordered some drinks and started catching up on everything that was going on.

-Sihle: "I really can't believe that Minnie is gone. People are departing, hey. Only this morning I heard that Al, your ex, got killed a week ago. And now it's Minnie. Yooh!"

-Sthandiwe: "Please don't spoil my mood by mentioning Al. Please."

-Sihle: "You had nothing to do with his death, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Of course not."

She wanted what happened with Alizwa to stay between her and Chris, so she didn't tell her about it.

And she quickly changed the subject by telling her about Naledi, her pregnancy and everything.

-Sihle: "I'm disappointed in Chris, hey. But I'm glad you're not letting this destroy what you two have."

-Sthandiwe: "I know that Chris loves me, Sihle. And I believe him when he says it was a mistake. So hey, there's no way in hell I'm gonna let a mistake or Naledi herself come between me and him. Not after everything we've been through... But what I hated is that he didn't tell me about the whole thing until I found the photo."

-Sihle: "But he's remorseful so..."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, so we're gonna be okay."

Then she told her about her theory about Minnie's death.

-Sihle: "You know what I think? I think you're right. And I think whatever she wanted to tell you was about Naledi."

-Sthandiwe: "Huh?"

-Sihle: "Think about it, chomi. What could she have found that concerns you in Cape Town? You never lived there, the only thing that connected you to that city is Chris. And that same Chris has now left

the place, leaving this Naledi bitch behind to be here with you. How do you think she feels about that? Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if she's not even pregnant. This could even be deeper than we think. And maybe Minnie found out about her schemes and now she's gone."

That really got Sthandiwe thinking.

-Sthandiwe: "You could be right, hey. And there's only one way to find out."

She said that getting up to kiss her cheek.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sorry but I gotta run now. I should follow up on this."

-Sihle: "Ah come on, you're leaving me already? Where are you off to?"

-Sthandiwe: "Will tell you all about it some other time. I really gotta run."

-Sihle: "And now I gotta go home early to deal with my annoying sisters-in-law. Agh."

-Sthandiwe: "Please don't entertain their bullshit. No offense, but your sisters-in-law are both just diva wannabes who think they've made it in life and now they have a right to look down on other people. I just hate people like them."

-Sihle: "You and me both. They really make me sick."

-Sthandiwe: "Toughen up, sthandwa sam, and show them that they shouldn't mess with you. Exactly what I'm gonna do to my suddenly nasty soon-to-be mother-in-law. But we'll talk about that some other time. Bye, babe."

-Sihle: "Okay, bye, tough cookie."

They both laughed as Sthandiwe walked away.

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As soon as she got to her car she called the PI she had used before and asked to see him. Luckily he was still in his office and he told her to come by. On the way she called Chris and asked for Naledi's personal details. She was his PA so he knew them and he gave them to her, but asked what she was going to do with them after. She told him the truth, that she wanted her PI to look into her, but she didn't give him the real reason why.

When she got to the PI's office she had what he'd need to carry out the assignment. She wanted him to go to Cape Town and find everything he could about Naledi, and fast. Anything from her past but more importantly everything in her present. She wanted to know what she was up to at present.

The PI took the assignment even though he was swamped. Only because he knew that she paid well - way above his standard rates.

She left the PI's office in a hurry remembering her date with Chris. He'd said he'd pick her up at 19:30 and she was running late. She got home and ran straight upstairs to get ready. And obviously when

Chris got there she was still not done, she was still doing her make up so he waited for her downstairs. She wore a red knee-length body-hugging dress, black stilletos, and white gold accessories. She loves body-hugging dresses because they sit well on her hour glass shaped body.

She looked beautiful. But what made her feel more beautiful was the unending compliments from Chris when she got downstairs. He just couldn't stop complimenting her, especially because it was his first time seeing her wearing that dress. It was a dress that she bought in Osaka.

Then he took her hand and they walked out. When they got to his father's car that he was driving, he got the door for her. She got in and after closing it for her he went to get in on his side and drove off.

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They got to this restaurant in Rosebank, and it was only after they had walked in that she realised that it was closed and opened for just the two of them. He had booked the entire restaurant. And there were red rose petals everywhere on the floor leading to their table that had lit candles. He had organised a romantic evening out for them and he hadn't forgotten live music that she loves. He had hired a live band from downtown Jo'burg.

-Sthandiwe: "Wow, babe. You did all this for me?"

-Chris: "You deserve it, sthandwa sam, and more."

-Sthandiwe: "I love it, sthandwa sam. But how did you organise it at such a short time?"

-Chris: "I asked for favours here and there. I just had to make it happen... Baby, I know that what I did is hurting you. And I hate seeing you hurt because of me. I also know that this doesn't really fix anything but it's my way of saying I'm sorry. And I promise you, sthandwa sam, I will make sure that this doesn't hurt you any further. I will deal with Naledi and make sure that she doesn't contact you again and that her pregnancy doesn't come between us."

-Sthandiwe: "I already forgave you, babe. And as long you keep your promise, you and I are gonna be okay."

-Chris: "I promise, hon, I will keep my promise."

She laughed.

-Sthandiwe: "You promise to keep your promise. Nice and funny, hey."

They both laughed. And the waitress came with their starters. After that they enjoyed their delicious main course meal while listening to the subtle instrumental music played by the band in the background. They sure were enjoying each other's company and the evening was just about them, they had forgotten about everything else that was happening. They talked about their future and even set a date for the wedding, which was pretty close, on the 25th of April - Chris' birthday.

An evening out was really what they both needed and they both enjoyed it. But hey, all good things come to an end. Time for them to go home arrived so they left. He drove her home, took her inside the house, kissed her goodnight and drove home. She went to bed happy that night, completely forgotten about everything else that was going on. She could see her future with Chris, and from where she was standing it was looking bright again.

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The next morning, she woke up feeling refreshed. She cleaned around the house then she got ready for their unfortunate trip to Cape Town, which Chris had paid for. When he got there, she was already done and they took the uber to the airport.

Same thing they did when they got to Cape Town, they took the uber to Chris' apartment - it was still his.

It was only when they got there that they started talking about Minenhle's death and exchanged more theories on what could have happened to her, wanting to look at all possibilities. Then Chris decided to call Claire and ask some more about the girl. Claire was working with her so she definitely knew more than them about what was going on in her life during her final days.

But the call was just taking too long so Sthandiwe decided to leave Chris in the bedroom and go to the kitchen to see if she couldn't get anything to eat in the meantime. But as she was still opening the fridge, she heard the doorbell. She wondered who it could be but she went to open anyway. And at the door she was met by Naledi herself. She recognised her from the photo but she still kept her cool. Naledi was a beautiful woman, a natural beauty, but what came out of her mouth was nowhere near beautiful.

-Sthandiwe: "Hello. Can I help you?"

-Naledi: "Bitch please. I'm not here for you, I'm here for the father of my baby. I know that he's back. Now move your ass to the side."

Oh gosh, the nerve of this woman.

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Naledi was pissing Sthandiwe off and Sthandiwe knew exactly what would happen next, so she tried to avoid it.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris!"

She called out for him and he answered from the bedroom.

-Sthandiwe: "Baby, please come deal with this psycho before I break her neck."

Exchanging words with her and being rude was something she wasn't even considering. What she felt like doing was to kick the crap out of her, but the better outcome would be for things to not escalate to that point. So she tried to maintain her composure and called Chris to come and handle the situation. But Naledi just had to push her.

-Naledi: "Bitch, who are you calling a psycho?"

She asked already breathing heavily, clearly angry. And the next thing, she tried to slap Sthandiwe, something she would soon come to regret. Sthandiwe's reflexes are always on point, she quickly swayed her head backwards. The slap missed her face by what seemed to be just a couple of centimetres but it didn't miss the chance to infuriate her. Anger thundered through her veins like liquid fire, and she could no longer keep her cool. She came back not with a slap but with two quick, mean punches right straight to Naledi's face, causing her to stagger backwards. Just then Chris came out of the bedroom.

-Chris: "What's going on here?"

-Naledi: "Why don't you ask this animal? She just punched me and I'm going to open an assault case. She's going to sleep in a cell tonight."

She said that holding her nose closed with one hand, trying to stop the blood that was now coming out of her nostrils, while rummaging through her handbag with the other.

-Sthandiwe: "I was only introducing myself to you. I can see that in your head you think you know me but, honey, you don't. If you did, you'd know not to call me a bitch or worse try to hit me. But now I'm sure you'll think twice before you do it again. And you can go ahead and open the case. But when giving the statement don't forget to mention that you attacked me first. You came here to attack me."

-Naledi: "You're just gonna stand there and let her do this to me, Chris? I'm carrying your baby for Christ's sake."

But Chris was obviously not on her side. And he plainly ignored the fact that she was bleeding.

-Chris: "What are you even doing here, Naledi? Didn't I tell you not to make any form of contact with me or Thandi?"

-Naledi: "I came because I want us to talk about our baby."

She was now covering her nose with tissues that she had gotten out of her handbag.

-Chris: "Sisi, I told you that I will only discuss that baby once I know for sure that it's mine. I told you that once you are 11 weeks I want a prenatal paternity test done, then we'll take it from there."

-Naledi: "I ain't doing no prenatal paternity test. I won't put my baby at risk."

-Chris: "I'm talking about Non-Invasive Prenatal Paternity Test that's gonna be done on your blood. It poses no risk whatsoever to the baby."

-Naledi: "Still, I'm not doing it."

-Chris: "Well, that's unfortunate because until I know that I'm the father of that baby, I don't have anything to say to you."

-Naledi: "She put you up to this, didn't she?"

She said that pointing to Sthandiwe. Sthandiwe didn't utter a single word, she just zipped her mouth. She didn't want to exchange any more words with her, least of all about that baby. She just let Chris handle it.

-Chris: "Hey, you will respect Thandi, she's my fiancée. You disrespect her again, in any way, trust me you won't like my reaction. You get that? And I want that test done. I will make the arrangements and contact you when you are 11 weeks. Now please leave my apartment."

His voice was stern, she saw that he wasn't joking. She quickly turned around and walked out, her hand still on her nose.

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After she left, Chris turned to Sthandiwe.

-Chris: "I'm sorry, babe. I didn't know that she was coming here."

But Sthandiwe wasn't interested in talking about that woman anymore. Punching her had given her enough satisfaction and now that chapter was closed to her - or at least for the day.

-Sthandiwe: "Sthandwa sam, please I don't wanna waste any more time talking about that woman, we have more important things to talk about. What did Claire say?"

She asked already walking over to the couch to sit down. Chris joined her.

-Chris: "She too doesn't think Minnie was using or that she committed suicide. She says she's been telling Xolisa the same thing but the guy still doesn't wanna get into that. He just wants this to be over. All he wants is to bury his sister and mourn her in peace."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, to me it won't be over until I know what really happened. It won't be over until the right person pays."

-Chris: "Claire gave me a phone number of one of Minnie's friends. Her name's Lwethu and apparently she's the only friend Minnie had retained from her group of old friends. Claire thinks she may know what was going on with Minnie."

-Sthandiwe: "Have you called her?"

-Chris: "Not yet."

-Sthandiwe: "I think I should do it. Please give me the number."

He gave it to her and she called Lwethu. She told her that she was Minnie's friend from Jo'burg and that she would like to see her. Lwethu didn't have a problem with that, but she told her to come to her place after work.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, Lwethu says we should go to her, at this place called Luzuko. Do you know it? She says it's close to Site C in Khayelitsha."

-Chris: "I don't know the place but I know Site C, so we'll go."

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Later, they drove to this place that they didn't even know. As it turned out it was about 5 km away from Site C. And Lwethu wasn't even living in that neighbourhood but across the road in an informal settlement called Thabo Mbeki. She had asked them to wait for her at this Caltex Filling Station that was there. But when they called her after pulling up at the station her phone was off. They kept trying but her phone kept sending them straight to voicemail. They waited but she wasn't coming.

-Sthandiwe: "Babe, we can't keep waiting here. Let's go to those shacks and ask around, maybe someone will know Lwethu."

-Chris: "It's a lot of ground to cover, babe. What are the chances of getting someone who knows her?"

-Sthandiwe: "Most people know each other in informal settlements, Chris. Besides, she said her place is not far from this station."

-Chris: "But, babe... Okay, firstly lemme say don't read too much into what I'm about to say, just take it as I say it. It's not safe in informal settlements, especially if you're a visitor who doesn't even know the place. And I don't feel right about leaving my car here unattended."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay then, stay behind and keep an eye on your car, I'll go alone. But I'll leave everything here, the phone and the jewellery if that will make you feel better. But what I'm not gonna do is to go back without talking to Lwethu, not when we're already here."

-Chris: "Are you sure about this? I know I'm not."

-Sthandiwe: "We can't send you because Lwethu is expecting me, a woman. So just stay here, I'll be fine."

She left her things in the car and got out.

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After a lot of asking around and walking in creepy, narrow alleys she got someone who knew where Lwethu was staying.

She went to the house and found her home. She apologised for her switched off phone saying the battery was flat and their power was out.

Sthandiwe understood. And she didn't waste any more of her time, she went straight to the point, asking about Minenhle. Lwethu said the same thing Claire had said, that Minenhle was not using or even suicidal. But she had no idea what could have really happened to her.

-Lwethu: "But the last time I saw her she just acted strange out of the blue."

-Sthandiwe: "Strange how? And when was this?"

-Lwethu: "Monday. My other friend and I had lunch with her. We were just talking and the next thing she just went quiet and wanted to get the hell out of that restaurant as soon as she could. That was very strange if you ask me. And on Tuesday it was her day off work and she had agreed to accompany me to Stellenbosch but she just changed her mind, saying she was now going to Jo'burg. Then Thursday morning, which is yesterday, I got the news that she's dead."

-Sthandiwe: "What were you all talking about before she wanted to leave the restaurant that day?"

-Lwethu: "I don't remember, hey."

-Sthandiwe: "Please try to remember, Lwethu. It's important."

-Lwethu: "I'm sorry, I just don't remember. And I don't see how it could be important, we were just talking."

Sthandiwe just gave up, she was getting nothing from this woman. No lead, no nothing. So they had driven all the way to this side of town for nothing. That was really disappointing. But before she left, she thanked Lwethu anyway for her time.

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She went back to Chris and they drove back home. But before they got home they passed by his favourite restaurant in Sea Point for some takeouts as none of them had energy to cook dinner.

But Sthandiwe didn't feel like eating. She was just frustrated that they were still in the dark, not knowing anything about what had really happened to Minenhle.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, you know that you have to eat. And don't worry we'll know what happened to Minnie. It's still early days."

He said brushing her back as they sat at their dining table that evening. She ended up forcing herself to eat then they went to bed.

The next day was Saturday and they spent the entire day indoors. Sthandiwe decided to give her mind a break, she decided to stop thinking about Minenhle and just focus on spending some quality time with her man. They ordered in and just chilled together.

And on Sunday they got up and got ready to go to church together, Sthandiwe's request. But she wasn't even sure if she wanted to go because her heart wanted to or only because she wanted to pray for a lead in Minenhle's murder. Either case they went and she had her prayer in the house of the Lord.

Then after church she called Sensei Makishi. Returning his call was long overdue. She broke the news to him, that she was no longer coming to live in Okinawa. Telling him in person was already out, because a lot had happened and a lot was still happening, so she had no time to go there.

Well, of course he didn't mind, but he asked her to come visit in October as it was going to be a great month for karate enthusiasts in Okinawa, with more than 15 events related to karate scheduled. She promised him that she would come even though at the back of her mind she knew that it might not happen. She was sick and she didn't know how sick she would be by then.

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Anyway, on Monday, around 13:00, they got the lead they had been waiting for. From Sthandiwe's PI. He came by their apartment and filled them in on his findings. As it turned out Naledi was suffering from bipolar disorder. And when she's off her meds she would go off the rails. But out of all the incidents in her past only one drew Sthandiwe's attention. Apparently, when she was 16 she was dating this 18 year-old guy. But when the guy dumped her for another girl she claimed to be pregnant - which later turned out to be a lie. The guy wouldn't have any of that, he denied responsibility for the pregnancy and told her to keep her distance from him. Something he came to regret when she put a knife through his stomach, stabbing him three times. His soul left his body before he could even get to the hospital, he died, but Naledi only spent two years in a psych ward, because her lawyer convinced the judge that his client was unstable with evidence from psychological evaluations and records of two suicide attempts prior to the stabbing incident.

-Sthandiwe: "This sounds familiar. Exactly what she's doing to you now, Chris. She's lying about the pregnancy. Sihle was right about this woman."

-Chris: "Goodness what did I get myself into?"

But Sthandiwe didn't want to get into that. She just turned to the PI.

-Sthandiwe: "Now that I know about her past I want to know what she's up to now."

But the PI hadn't found anything interesting about her present life. Apparently now that she had no job she would be home and only go out to meet up with her girls. Nothing interesting or on the wrong side of the law. So disappointing to Sthandiwe. But when the PI showed her the pictures of the girls Naledi would spend time with, bells rang in her head. One of them was apparently her cousin and the other was:

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, this is Lwethu. She's friends with Naledi, and Minnie was friends with her. Which means Minnie knew Naledi. Seems like Sihle was right once again, Naledi could be connected to Minnie's death."

-Chris: "What? Yes, the woman is unstable, babe, but to think that she killed Minnie is a bit of a stretch. Don't you think? Why would she kill her?"

-The PI: "Would you like me to, maybe, look into that?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, thank you. I'll take it from here."

-The PI: "Okay then, my job here is done. You'll find my invoice inside this file. I know you're good for it."

And with that he walked out, leaving the file with the invoice and everything he had found about Naledi.

-Chris: "Why didn't you want him to look into this?"

-Sthandiwe: "Why waste money on a PI when I can find the answers myself?"

-Chris: "What do you mean?"

-Sthandiwe: "Let me call Lwethu first."

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She went to get her phone from the kitchen and made that phone call. Lwethu answered.

-Lwethu: "Hello."

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Lwethu, it's Thandi. I need to ask. Do you know Naledi Thanda?"

-Lwethu: "Of course, she's my friend's cousin. Why do you ask?"

-Sthandiwe: "Do you happen to know anything about her pregnancy?"

-Lwethu: "Naledi's not pregnant... Ummh, I remember now. Her cousin and I were talking about that when Minnie suddenly went quiet that day."

-Sthandiwe: "Was Naledi there?"

-Lwethu: "No. It was just me, her cousin and Minnie."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. What were you two saying exactly about her pregnancy?"

-Lwethu: "She's not pregnant. And her cousin was worried about her. She was worried that she was again not taking..."

She stopped, probably realising that she shouldn't be divulging that kind of information to a stranger.

-Sthandiwe: "She was worried that she was not taking what?"

-Lwethu: "Sorry, I can't help you."

And with that she hung up.

-Chris: "What have you found?"

-Sthandiwe: "That Naledi is without a doubt not pregnant. And that Minnie found out about it. But Lwethu couldn't tell me exactly how much Minnie knew. All I know is that Naledi's cousin was worried about Naledi. Worried that she was not taking... something."

-Chris: "Something?"

-Sthandiwe: "Lwethu wouldn't finish that sentence but I think I know what she wanted to say. I think the cousin was worried that Naledi was again not taking her medication. And that is making her delusional, lying once again about being pregnant to a man she'd slept with. And that man happens to be you. Maybe in their conversation they mentioned your name and Minnie got to know that Naledi's latest victim is you. And I think that's why she suddenly went quiet that day and wanted to get the hell outta that restaurant. Then the next day she called me saying she was going to Jo'burg and that she had something she wanted to tell me. I think this is what she wanted to tell me. That you'd slept with a dangerous unstable woman and that you were now in danger. And maybe Naledi found out that she was about to blow the whistle on her and silenced her for good."

-Chris: "I hear you, sthandwa sam, but there are several 'maybes' and 'I thinks' in what you're saying. Meaning we don't know for sure that it's what happened."

-Sthandiwe: "Well, there's only one way to find out. From Naledi herself. We need to pay her a visit. Her address is in that file. Are you coming with me?"

-Chris: "Of course. I also want to know the truth as much if not more than you do."

-Sthandiwe: "But I hope you know that getting it out of her won't be easy. And things could get out of hand."

-Chris: "But I thought you promised to leave that life of violence behind."

-Sthandiwe: "Hell, I'm not leaving anything behind. I told you that I'll always do what I gotta do to get what I want and to protect myself or the people I care about. Xolisa is family. We need to know what happened to his sister and get him closure."

-Chris: "Okay then, we'll do whatever it takes."

-Sthandiwe: "Glad we're on the same side. But I don't want her dead, I just want the truth. And before we go I need to ask. Where are the car registration plates you took from my garage last year?"

-Chris: "The Gauteng plates?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yes, Chris, come on."

-Chris: "I keep them under the mat in the boot of my car. Why?"

-Sthandiwe: "I wasn't sure when you took them last year when all I wanted was to just destroy them. But now, I must say, I'm glad you took them. They are gonna come in handy because we don't know what will happen when we get to Naledi and there are a lot of eyes in the township."

-Chris: "But you better pray we don't get stopped by the traffic officers."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah... You know when I went to that cottage with Patrick in Ireland to get his sister, I didn't know what we would find there or what we would be met with. We were flying blind. But I went anyway, because it was the right thing to do. Even now I don't know how much trouble we are gonna get ourselves in, but we have to do this."

Chris was all in. They went downstairs and changed the plates then drove to Naledi's address, in Kuyasa in Khayelitsha. According to the PI she was staying with just her mother. But he also said you wouldn't find her mother home during the week because she was a live-in housekeeper in Tokai. That worked in their favour.

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They got to the address in Kuyasa and parked outside the gate.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, please stay here and keep an eye out, I'll go in."

-Chris: "Why don't you let me go in?"

-Sthandiwe: "No offense, babe, but you slept with that woman so you aren't exactly the right candidate to extract the truth out of her."

Oops! That silenced Chris. Sthandiwe got out of the car and walked to the house. She knocked and Naledi came to open.

-Naledi: "You? Look who's come to attack me in my own house now?"

Sthandiwe just grabbed her by her T-shirt and pushed her inside.

-Sthandiwe: "If you dare scream or make any noise, trust me it'll be the last thing you do before I break your neck."

Of course, she wasn't going to do that, she just wanted her to shut up and not draw attention. And because the other day Naledi had seen the preview of what she could do to her she made no noise.

-Naledi: "What do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "Who else is here?"

-Naledi: "There's no one else. It's just me."

-Sthandiwe: "Good. Now take a seat on that couch."

Naledi did as instructed. Sthandiwe pulled the coffee table and sat on it, right in front of her.

-Naledi: "I asked, what do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "I want to know about what you did to my friend Minenhle. Look, I don't want no games, all I want from you is the truth. I already know that it's you who killed her and made it look like she has OD'ed. I also know that you're not pregnant, I know about your disorder and I know about your past. Now what I wanna know is why you killed Minnie and where you got the heroin from?"

But Naledi wouldn't talk, she denied knowing anything about what she was talking about. That just infuriated Sthandiwe and she slapped her. But that slap didn't make Naledi scared, it just made her arrogant. She confessed to everything in an arrogant manner, showing not even the slightest of remorse.

-Naledi: "Yes, I killed your friend. I killed that bitch. Now what?... She came here Tuesday morning last week and told me that she knew that I was lying about being pregnant. And that I'd end up doing to Chris what I did to that guy when I was 16. She told me that she'd heard everything from my cousin, about my sickness and everything I did in the past. And that she wouldn't let me repeat it to Chris, because you two were her friends. She said she would tell you everything, and I couldn't let that happen. So I got the heroin and went to her flat. I caught her off guard, suffocated her with chloroform first then tied her up. It was only after she regained consciousness that I introduced heroin into her bloodstream. Enough heroin to kill her. I knew that she had a troubled past so everybody would think that she was using and she had committed suicide or OD'ed unintentionally."

She also told her where she had gotten the heroin from. Sthandiwe just felt sickened by the whole thing but at least no blood had to come out before that confession.

She didn't utter a single word to her after hearing it. She just took her phone out, stopped recording then called Xolisa to tell him everything that had happened to his sister. Xolisa was now also in Cape Town to get his sister's body transported back to Gauteng for burial. But after hearing what Sthandiwe was telling him he dropped everything and told her that he was coming to where she was. She sent him her location pin and he got an uber to drive him there.

After that, Sthandiwe called Chris to come inside and they waited for Xolisa sitting with the unstable Naledi.

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When Xolisa finally got there, he was carrying a gun with a silencer. And immediately when he saw the woman who had killed his sister he jacked its slide back and let it slam home, chambering a round. He was ready to shoot her but Chris and Sthandiwe intervened. They tried to calm him down. Chris took the gun from his hand then Sthandiwe dragged him to the side, to knock some sense into him.

-Sthandiwe: "Buddy, I know that you're angry but don't do this. You'll get in trouble. Let's just call the police and let them handle it. I recorded her confession."

-Xolisa: "The police? Thandi, you're the one who told me that she's done this before but she got away with it. Spending only 2 years in a psych ward is to get away with it. The same thing will happen even now. She'll get out and continue killing people and I can't let that happen."

-Sthandiwe: "XO, trust me you do not wanna do this. Once you cross that line, there's no un-crossing it. KG said this to me last year and he was right. Trust me, I know. After my first kill I was so shaken, but then I killed again and again, until I couldn't feel anything anymore. Crossing to that side is easy but getting back isn't. I know this. I embarked on a quest to find inner peace overseas, even a spiritual journey to clean up my act but because I've killed before I find it easy to go back there, to do it again. Will I ever be able to leave this life completely? I don't know. But what I do know is that you do not wanna be like that, buddy."

-Xolisa: "If you can do it and be able to live with it, so can I."

-Sthandiwe: "XO, no. You are not a killer. And I do not want you to be like me, it's not good, trust me. It's like I said to Sihle before I went to Okinawa, make choices that you know you can live with. If you do this, XO, next thing you'll be running so fast to the wrong direction and coming back won't be easy. I learned to live with the fact that I've killed a lot of people. Question is, can you? I know you think you can right now, but I know you can't. Taking another human being's life is not easy to live with."

-Xolisa: "You're able to live with it because every kill you make is justifiable. This one's justifiable too, so I'll be able to live with it."

-Sthandiwe: "Lemme tell you this, XO. Killing another person under these circumstances is wrong. It's a crime and it's illegal. The moment you find yourself justifying murder just know that you are on the wrong side. And I don't want that for you, buddy. You're innocent, XO, and I want you to stay that way. I do not want you to be like me. Me, I'm old testament. I believe in bullets. Blood. God's wrath. You hurt me or the people I care about, I punish you. But you do not have to be like that. I'm not proud of what I do, it's not right. Please don't do this. Don't spoil your hands with blood."

-Xolisa: "Okay, fine, I'm standing down. But I want just 5 minutes alone with her."

-Sthandiwe: "Fine. Five minutes then we call the cops."

She went to Chris and they walked out. Leaving Xolisa alone with Naledi.

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They went back to the car and got in.

-Chris: "You're handling this, me sleeping with Naledi, the entire thing, better than I thought you would. Thank you, babe. And I'm sorry that it resulted in Minnie being killed. I feel so guilty right now."

-Sthandiwe: "You didn't kill Minnie, Chris, and you certainly didn't know that Naledi would kill her."

-Chris: "I can't believe that I didn't see that she wasn't okay."

-Sthandiwe: "You couldn't see it because she isn't crazy, she's just sick. And her disorder only gets out of hand when she's not taking her medication... Anyway, where's the gun you took from Xolisa?"

-Chris: "I left it on the couch."

-Sthandiwe: "Chris, come on, how could you leave a gun with Xolisa and Naledi in the same room?"

-Chris: "Don't worry, I took the bullets out."

He said that taking them out of his pocket.

-Sthandiwe: "Shit, Chris! The one in the chamber."

She was now panicking. She opened the door and got out of the car in a hurry. But Chris remained calm. She ran back to the house, but when she got to the door Xolisa was already walking out. She saw the gun in his hand and him shaking like a leaf, and her heart just sank.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh no, Xolisa. What have you done?"

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To Chris' surprise, Sthandiwe walked back to the car alone without Xolisa. And instead of getting inside she knocked on his window, and he quickly rolled it down, eager to hear what she was going to say.

-Chris: "What's going on? Come on, get in. Where's X? We need to get out of here, now."

-Sthandiwe: "What do you mean?"

-Chris: "Baby, we have the fake plates on, no one will identify my car, no one will connect us to this murder. We just need to go, now."

-Sthandiwe: "Murder? What murder?"

-Chris: "Naledi's. What are you asking?"

-Sthandiwe: "Naledi is okay, Chris. XO didn't use that gun."

-Chris: "He didn't? Oh...that's...that's good. It's a relief."

But Sthandiwe noticed that his face didn't quite display what he was saying with his mouth. He looked, and even sounded, somewhat disappointed. Which begged the question though, why would he be like that? But of course, she didn't have the answer. Or maybe she was just seeing and hearing things. Paranoia has to be one of the worst feelings ever. But hey, paranoia or not, she couldn't ignore what she just saw. But she didn't say anything.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, it's a relief. Now please come inside the house to wait for the cops with us."

And with that she turned around and walked back to the house. Chris took his time to join them, but he finally did.

And the cops arrived too. Sthandiwe repeated to them what Naledi had told her, the entire confession, but she didn't give them the recording. For some reason, probably her paranoia, she had decided to keep the recording for herself. She had even retracted the statement she had made to Xolisa earlier, that she had the recording, by saying she'd lied so he wouldn't pull the trigger, desperate times calling for desperate measures.

One thing she had learned is that, if something doesn't feel right it probably isn't. And to be on the safe side it's wise to not play all your cards, it's wise to have that one ace up your sleeve just in case you need it.

Anyway, when the cops asked the circumstances of the confession, she said they had their suspicions and when they came to ask Naledi about it she didn't deny it, instead she'd bragged about what she had done. And when they asked Naledi if that was true she didn't deny it, her answer was "maybe". And she was pretty chilled about it. If she was any cooler than she was she would probably have frostbite. The police took her to the Police Station and Sthandiwe also had to go down to station to give her statement of events. After that Chris drove her and Xolisa home. And for some reason, all of them had little to say along the way. Probably because they were all still digesting the whole thing - Minenhle's murder, Naledi's confession, everything. But whatever the reason was, there was just tension in that car until they reached Xolisa's hotel. He got off and Chris continued driving to his apartment, in complete silence.

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Once the two stepped inside the apartment, however, Sthandiwe heard Chris saying something as he sat down on the couch in the lounge area.

-Chris: "I really thought X would pull that trigger. My feeling of guilt was already multiplying. I'm glad he didn't."

-Sthandiwe: "He wanted to shoot her but he just couldn't go through with it. Guess what I said to him sunk in. And he couldn't bear the thought of carrying the guilt of killing someone on his shoulders."

She finished talking already turning around the corner to the kitchen, leaving him in the lounge. She went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water. She opened it in a hurry and gulped the water down in frustration. A lot was going on in her head. Bells were ringing and over the past few months she'd learned not to ignore them when they go off like that. A lot of questions kept popping up in her head and she couldn't ignore them. Something was just not adding up. Why did Chris choose to take the bullets out of the gun instead of simply taking the gun itself? And if he'd seen that as a good move then why didn't he clear the chamber as well? Did he perhaps want Xolisa to use the gun with that round in the chamber? Is that why he looked so disappointed when he heard that he didn't? Did he want Naledi dead? If so, why? They had already found out that she wasn't carrying his baby, so why did he want her dead? A lot more questions kept popping up until she was brought back to earth by Chris himself hugging her from behind. She jumped, startled.

-Chris: "I'm sorry, sthandwa sam. I didn't mean to startle you."

He said that taking a step back. Sthandiwe exhaled.

-Sthandiwe: "It's okay, I just didn't hear you walk in."

She put the bottle of water in the sink and turned to look at him.

-Chris: "You've been awfully quiet since we left Naledi's house. Are you okay?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, I'm okay. I was just thinking about Minnie."

-Chris: "I still can't believe that she's gone too, hey. But at least her killer is gonna pay."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

She turned and looked out the kitchen window, checking the beautiful view.

-Sthandiwe: "Anyway, why did you decide to leave this beautiful city and move back to Jo'burg? Why did you close up shop here?"

-Chris: "But I thought I told you why. I wanted to be closer to you."

-Sthandiwe: "But we had agreed that I was the one who was gonna move down here. And by the time you decided to close down your office you weren't even aware that I was looking for a job in Jo'burg. I still hadn't told you about it. And I only decided to stick around Jo'burg because I thought you had changed your mind about marrying me. But when you proposed again I was ready to leave everything behind and come here, but you had already made a decision to leave this city. I just don't get why."

-Chris: "I realised that it was selfish of me to expect you to leave everything behind and come here. Your entire life is in Jo'burg, babe, and so is mine. My family is over there and so is my woman. All that's left is for me to open my private practice over there."

-Sthandiwe: "Alright."

-Chris: "What's with the questions anyway? We had already gone through this."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, I was just asking... And I'll see you in a bit. I need to take a walk."

-Chris: "A walk? But I was hoping we could prepare dinner together."

-Sthandiwe: "Sorry, babe. I need some air, but I won't be long. I'm just gonna take a walk around the block and be back now-now."

-Chris: "Okay. But what would you like for dinner?"

-Sthandiwe: "Anything approved by my doctor."

And with that she walked out. She really needed some alone time to think things through. What was her fiancé up to?

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She said it would be a short walk but she took her time. The walk helped clear her head and she got to think properly. By the time she got back she knew that she couldn't bury her head in the sand, she had to find out what was really going on. But how was she going to do it? She still had no idea but she knew that she had to do it.

She walked into the apartment and Chris was in the dining area, setting the table.

-Chris: "Hey, how was the walk?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay."

Her answer was that short. She was suddenly not feeling comfortable around Chris because she knew that he was hiding something from her. And she didn't know how big it was.

-Chris: "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. You can come help me out."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm coming but I need to take a quick shower first."

And with that she quickly turned and walked to the master bedroom. Maybe she was being paranoid, but she had this feeling and she just couldn't stand the sight of him anymore.

When she got to the bedroom she stripped her clothes off and went to the en-suite. She got in the shower, turned the water on, and just sat down on the floor, letting the water cascade down on her. She was only killing time just until she could find a way to look at Chris. She sat like that for some time until Chris came and knocked on the glass shower door. But because it was steamy he couldn't see that she was actually not showering but just sitting on the floor.

-Chris: "Baby, come on, the food is gonna get cold."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not hungry, babe. You know that my appetite is always off lately."

-Chris: "But you know that you HAVE to eat, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "Okay, I'm coming."

He walked out. She got to her feet and started doing some actual cleaning up then got out to lotion and got dressed.

Then with a deep breath she walked out to join her fiancé at the table. She sat down to eat and acted normal. She couldn't exactly ask him straight out what he was hiding, because chances were he was going to lie anyway. So if she wanted to get to the truth she had to do the digging herself.

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Anyway, she managed to take a page from Chris' book - acting normal as if nothing was going on, until they went to bed. And she was exhausted so she dozed off immediately after hitting the pillow, and she didn't give a damn what Chris thought.

In the morning, she was woken up by a call from her doctor. The test results were back so she had to come in. She hung up and pushed Chris so he would wake up. He groaned and pulled the covers.

-Chris: "I'm up, baby, I'm up. No need to push me."

-Sthandiwe: "My doctor just called. I have to go back to Jo'burg today. There's nothing left for me to do here anyway. I did what I came for, it's time to go."

-Chris: "Okay, you can go but I'll stick around. I have a few things to sort out here, including putting this apartment up for rent and moving my important stuff to Jo'burg."

-Sthandiwe: "And when are you gonna join me up there?"

-Chris: "I don't know. In a few days."

That was good for her. Being away from him was going to give her a chance to figure out what to do next.

-Sthandiwe: "Alright then. Lemme go get ready."

-Chris: "Sure."

She left him in bed and went to take a shower. And after she was done getting ready she called a cab then went to the kitchen and made herself a peanut butter sandwich that she was so much craving for. Chris was still sleeping. She didn't know why but she wasn't complaining, at least now she didn't have to look at his face and pretend as if she wasn't suspicious.

After eating she went to the bedroom to get her stuff. And she found Chris awake, making the bed.

-Chris: "Wait for me to get ready, I'll take you to the airport."

-Sthandiwe: "No, it's okay, sthandwa sam, I've already called a cab. It'll be here any minute from now."

He gave up. She got her things and kissed him goodbye then walked out. Leaving him used to be hard but not this time around, all she felt was relief.

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She got to Jo'burg and went to see the doctor for her results. And they confirmed what she was already aware of, that she had liver damage. But the cause was yet to be established. However, after asking her some questions, checking her medical history and tracing comprehensively and cautiously the history of her NSAIDs use, the doctor excluded other causes of her liver injury and established the diagnosis of drug-induced liver injury. But what didn't make sense to Sthandiwe was that the symptoms didn't show until 3 months after the cessation of the suspected drugs. However, as it turned out, the onset time of drug-induced liver injury varies greatly from patient to patient. For some it takes days but for some it can take months.

And the bad news was that the damage was severe, grade 3. The symptoms were further aggravated, which indicated the need of hospitalisation or delayed hospital stay. But as long as she could still walk and do her things she had no time to spend lying in a hospital bed, at least not before finding out what was going on with Chris. It was her choice anyway. So her doctor just booked her an appointment with a Hepatologist for Friday of that week, and it was now a Tuesday.

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She left and went straight home to rest, that abnormal fatigue was crawling up her veins again.

On the way she called Sihle and asked her to pass by her house after work and she said she would.

She threw herself on the couch in the lounge immediately when she got home and dozed off until she was later woken up by Sihle ringing the doorbell. She got up and went to open.

-Sihle: "What, you were sleeping at this hour?"

-Sthandiwe: "I was tired, chomi."

They went to sit down on the couches and she told her about the diagnosis she got.

-Sihle: "But, chomi, if your doctor says you should be admitted then I think that's what you should do before you get more sick. You always take care of everybody else, chomi, but now it's time for you to take care of yourself."

-Sthandiwe: "I know, I know, and I will."

-Sihle: "Please do. Anyway, on the fun side, your wedding is in 2 months so we should be starting with the planning. Have you even found a wedding planner yet? If not, I can hook you up with the lady that organised my vow renewal ceremony. She's good. She's efficient and reliable. You can use her."

-Sthandiwe: "Okay. But planning a wedding is the last thing on my mind right now."

-Sihle: "What do you mean? Are you having cold feet? Doubts?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know. But something is going on with Chris, Sihle, and he's not talking to me about it. He's hiding something from me. And until I find out what he's hiding I can't..."

-Sihle: (interrupting) "You can't what? Marry him? That's insane, don't you think? What do you think he's hiding from you anyway? On the phone you told me that the woman who was claiming to be carrying his baby turned out to be lying. So what's the problem?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know what he's hiding but I just have this feeling that he's hiding something from me. And I think it's big."

-Sihle: "A feeling? You're gonna stop your wedding for a feeling?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not stopping anything, Sihle. All I'm saying is that I can't and I won't ignore this feeling. I'm gonna find out what he's hiding. That's all I care about right now."

-Sihle: "You know sometimes, chomi, people think they want to hear the truth. Then they hear it and they wish they didn't know. So whatever it is that Chris is hiding I'm sure he's keeping it from you to protect you. What's important is that the guy loves you, Thandi, and he wants to marry you. So why don't you focus on that?"

-Sthandiwe: "I can't. For my own peace of mind and sanity I need to know what's going on. So I'm not gonna do anything else until I get what I want."

-Sihle: "I forgot just how stubborn you are. Fine then, do what you gotta do. And if you need help just shout. I'm here for you. Okay? And I won't say anything to Chris or Xolisa. You were my friend before they even came into the picture so my loyalties lie with you."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, chomi. That really means a lot."

-Sihle: "Hey, we are a family. Fighting is normal but we'll always make up and cover each other's backs."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah."

Then they talked about Minnie and everything that was going on but Sihle didn't stick around for long. She had to go cook dinner for her family.

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure you're happy now that your sisters-in-law have left."

-Sihle: "Yoh you have no idea. Be glad you're not gonna have any, they are a nightmare."

But was the wedding going to continue? Sthandiwe herself didn't know. She just walked Sihle out and saw her get in her car.

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And as soon as Sihle drove off, she went upstairs to freshen up then drove to Palmridge. She had to go see how MaKhumalo was doing now that KG was no longer around.

She found her doing okay under the circumstances. But she sure missed him. They both did. But what mattered is that they had a bond with him and it was never going to break. And the love they shared was never going to go away no matter where he was.

MaKhumalo had also reported him missing as per their agreement. And both KG and Palesa had left all their belongings behind, so the claim was supported.

Anyway, MaKhumalo asked Sthandiwe to pay the police a visit because they had been wanting to talk to her since KG was staying with her before he went "missing". But because she had been away, in Eastern Cape, they weren't able to get hold of her. It was now two weeks since KG left but of course the police still wanted to talk to her, so she promised to go to the Police Station first thing in the morning.

Then she stuck around, helping MaKhumalo in the kitchen with dinner. She was just enjoying being with her again. It had been a while since they had their mother-daughter kind of talks and she missed that. After having dinner with the boys (KG's younger brothers) they talked and Sthandiwe even decided to sleep over.

And even though she didn't tell MaKhumalo the full story as to why she was feeling like Chris was hiding something from her, MaKhumalo advised her to not get into that marriage until all secrets were revealed. That made her even more determined to get to the truth. And she now knew just where to start.

In the morning, as MaKhumalo was getting ready to go to work, the boys getting ready to go to school, she was getting ready to leave too. She passed by the Eden Park Police Station, the station that serves Palmridge, and answered their questions then went home to prepare for her trip to Cape Town. But she wasn't going to see Chris. In fact, she didn't even tell him that she was coming to Cape Town.

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The person she wanted to see was Naledi. And as soon as she got to Cape Town and checked into a hotel she went to visit her at the Police Station where she was being held. She knew that if she wanted to know the truth about what was going on, Naledi was the starting point. But when Naledi saw her she just turned around to leave.

-Sthandiwe: "Naledi, please don't walk away. You may wanna hear what I have to say."

Naledi stopped and walked up to her.

-Naledi: "What do you want?"

-Sthandiwe: "Look, I know that we are not friends but I think we can help each other... I can help you if you can help me."

-Naledi: "Help each other? What can you possibly do to help me, huh? You put me in here, remember?"

Sthandiwe took out her phone and played her the confession she had recorded.

That captured Naledi's attention. It showed from the way she quickly sat down on that chair.

-Naledi: "Stop playing that and tell me what you're gonna do with it?"

-Sthandiwe: "The police now see Minnie's death as homicide, a case has been opened and you're behind bars. Now I don't know what you said in your statement but without this recording it's just my word against yours until the cops find real evidence, if they will. They don't really have a case. And things can remain that way if you tell me what I wanna know."

She told her what she wanted to know. Naledi hesitated, she was skeptical, understandably so, but in the end she told her everything she knew, leaving nothing behind. Sthandiwe was bewildered. And in all honesty she wished she hadn't dug around, just as Sihle had said. What Naledi told her about Chris was very disturbing, to say the least. And pushing herself up from that chair and out of that Police Station took a lot of energy, her knees suddenly felt wobbly. Yeah, hearing something shocking can do that to you.

And later that day she found herself walking the narrow alleys between those shacks across from Luzuko once again, to talk to Lwethu. She just had to verify some points in Naledi's story. And to make the cut deeper, Lwethu confirmed some of the things Naledi had said. So there she had it, the truth about her fiancé. The truth that kept her awake that night. She tried not to think about it, but it was difficult to avoid it. And the more she thought about it she got to fill in the blanks, she figured it all out. Damn! How could Chris do what he did? How could he lie, use and betray her like that? Didn't it bother him at all to look her in the eye knowing very well what he had done? A choking sob rose in her throat as she thought about it in her cold bed that night. Oh God, how could she bear it? This was the man she trusted. The man she was going to marry. She sat up on the bed, drew her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. Wrapping her arms around herself, she felt the hot tears welling in her eyes, spilling over. They streamed down her cheeks, dripping onto her arms, salty rivulets trickling into her mouth. It was tears of anger, more than anything else. Was she ever going to get over what Chris did? She sniffed, trying to pull herself together. She smeared a hand across her burning face, wiping the tears. And she got under covers and tried to fall asleep. And had it not been for the fatigue she probably would have stayed awake all night, especially because she had seen hard evidence of half of what Naledi had told her. Naledi had told her where she would find it and even though she was already regretting digging into this, she went to get it, there was no turning back. Now the question was, what was she going to do with the information she now had?

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Reaching a decision about what to do next was difficult for Shandiwe. She couldn't decide until she flew back to Jo'burg the next morning.

And later that day she received a call from Chris telling her that he was now home in Jo'burg and asked her to please come over because his parents were away. Even though she was still not ready to see him, she got ready and went.

-Sthandiwe: "You gotta do this, Sthandiwe."

She murmured the words in an undertone as she pulled up at Chris' gate. She hesitated before hitting the intercom but she was already there, she couldn't turn back. With a deep breath she hit it and Chris let her in. She drove in and parked in the driveway. And she just had to take another deep breath before getting out of the car and walking to the front door.

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But before she could knock Chris opened for her and she walked in.

-Chris: "Wow, you look amazing."

He said giving her a hug. She was sure he would appreciate a hug back but she didn't have the strength to return the gesture. A wave of anger just washed over her. Dear heaven, she couldn't stand having his arms around her. When she didn't return the hug Chris drew back in some alarm, gazing at her with anxious eyes.

-Chris: "Thandi?"

But Sthandiwe just shook her head as a sign of saying 'not now'. She still needed to calm that anger down or she would just burst and she didn't want that. She stifled a groan, then went to sit down on the couch without saying a word.

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, are you okay?"

She took a moment then spoke.

-Sthandiwe: "Am I okay? Why don't you tell me, Chris?"

Her tone was harsh and Chris was now sure that something was definitely wrong. And a terrible suspicion was stirring in his gut.

-Chris: "But, babe, I ain't no mind reader."

He said jokingly, trying to suppress the sense of trepidation he was feeling inside. That just made Sthandiwe angry again and she couldn't prevaricate any longer. She had to tell him that his secrets were out.

-Sthandiwe: "I know everything, Chris. I talked to Naledi."

-Chris: "What are you talking about?"

-Sthandiwe: "What am I talking about? I'm talking about you lying to me, Chris. I'm talking about you using me."

Chris sat down rather abruptly on the arm of the nearest couch. He knew that whatever she was about to say next wasn't going to be good for him and he couldn't take it standing.

-Chris: "Huh?"

He asked with his eyebrows raised.

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-Sthandiwe: "Okay, you wanna play dumb so let me paint this picture for you, slowly. Let's take it from the beginning. Chris, you are a psychologist. And last year in October you had a new patient, a 16 year old girl with general anxiety disorder. Her parents brought her to you but you referred her to a psychiatrist for medication. The parents and even the girl herself didn't want any drugs, all she wanted was psychotherapy from you, which is one of your specialties. But you insisted on referring her to the psychiatrist that you sometimes referred your patients to. And what happened? On her second visit to that psychiatrist he raped her. The psychiatrist that she trusted raped her then threatened her life if she told anyone. He knew that if that were to come out he would lose his license and go to prison - funny he didn't think about that before raping the poor girl. But even after giving out that threat he didn't trust that the girl won't talk so he started stalking her. He had her followed around and every time he would call her and let her know that he had eyes on her and that he would drop her dead at any time if she opened her mouth. So to live she had to make sure that she kept her mouth shut. The poor girl was now living in constant fear and the worst part was that she couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even her parents. And because they didn't know anything they took the girl back to see the guy. And you know what happened? That sick motherfucker did it again, he raped her again and again. It was now clear to the girl that the abuse won't stop as long as she was still seeing that psychiatrist, so she had to seek help. It was now in December and in her session with her psychologist, which happened to be you, she revealed everything. She told you everything that the psychiatrist you referred her to did to her. She came to you desperate and asking for help. But what did you do, Chris?"

Chris' jaw was now sagging. And it was evident that he was glad he was sitting down at that moment, because his legs would have hardly supported him, they were shaking. And his mind was probably inventorying how much Sthandiwe knew.

-Chris: "Baby, you don't understand. I uh...I..."

Evidently he didn't know what to say.

-Sthandiwe: "I understand perfectly, Chris. You called that girl a liar and demanded that she keep her mouth shut. Why? Because that psychiatrist is your friend and you didn't want him to get in trouble? Your patient, a minor, was being sexually molested and threatened, her life was in danger, she was now even suicidal and she came to you asking for help but instead of helping her and report the crime you made things worse by calling her a lying whore. Now, what professional psychologist does that? Chris, you were duty bound by law to protect the life of that patient. As a psychologist you are a mandated reporter, you were mandated by law to report that abuse. But no, even though the girl had specifically asked for your help you didn't do anything to help, you just made things worse. She left your office crying that day. And that's when your assistant, Naledi, followed her and tried to find out what was going on. But the girl was too distraught to talk so she just took Naledi's number and called her the following day. And during lunch hour they met up at the centre where your office was and she told her everything. Guess she felt a little comfortable talking to a complete stranger, a stranger that wasn't even a professional shrink because her shrink had failed her. At that moment she had made a decision and she no longer cared what that psychiatrist would do to her. She just had to let someone know about what he did to her before she took her own life. She gave Naledi a USB device with a video of her telling everything that had happened, including what you did to her. She asked her to do her a favour and take it to the police. But what she didn't tell her was that she was planning to kill herself that night, and she did. You played a role in that girl killing herself, Chris, and you know it."

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Chris covered his face with both hands, paralysed by shame.

-Sthandiwe: "But what did the crazy Naledi do after she had seen the video and heard that the girl had committed suicide? She came to you and used that info to blackmail you into sleeping with her. And you knew that you would be prosecuted for what you did...or didn't do. You knew that by law, your treatment of that patient and your failure to report the abuse would result in criminal and civil penalties, and it would be bye-bye to your career. So what did you do? You gave Naledi what she wanted. Your plan was to play along until you get your hands on that USB. But you lied to me. You lied when you said you slept with her because you thought I had moved on and that you weren't thinking straight. That was a lie, the real reason you were sleeping with her had nothing to do with me. And you also lied when you said you slept with her only once. Chris, I now know that you kept sleeping over at her place just so you could finally get your hands on that flash drive... But, Motaung, you still looked me in the eye and lied to me without even breaking a sweat."

-Chris: "Sthandwa sam, I'm sorry. I didn't set out to deceive you. It's just that the situation got complicated and I didn't know what to do."

-Sthandiwe: "You could have handled things better right from the beginning, Chris. But you didn't and you were now knee deep with Naledi and there was no end in sight. You weren't getting the USB and she was coming too strong that you couldn't take it anymore. And since you couldn't dump her or just fire her, you sacrificed your entire practice. You shut it down and left Cape Town, because you wanted to be away from her, then you started planning to open a new practice here in Jo'burg. And again you

lied to me. You lied, saying you were moving here because you wanted to be closer to me. You really are getting good at this lying business, aren't you?"

-Chris: "I didn't mean to lie to you, Thandi. You know that, right?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, what I know is that you didn't really break things off with Naledi. You didn't break them off because you still hadn't found that USB and you didn't want her to report you so you continued stringing her along even when you were here in Jo'burg. I don't know what you were planning but that's what you were doing. All those phone calls you would take outside every time we were together were from her, but because I trusted you I never thought much of them and I never asked you anything. But then she saw on social media that you were engaged, to me, and she went crazy. She went crazy and that's when she told you she was pregnant. But you, my lying and manipulative fiancé, you softened her heart by telling her what she wanted to hear. You told her that you loved only her and that our marriage was just gonna be a marriage of convenience. Wow, no wonder she had the nerve to disrespect me, she got the platform from you... She told you she was pregnant but you weren't sure if the baby was yours so you asked for that paternity test. And of course she refused to do it, for obvious reasons. But lemme leave that and come to the most sickening part."

Deep down he knew what she was talking about but he just had to ask the obvious question.

-Chris: "What part?"

-Sthandiwe: "The day my eyes landed on that photo on your laptop you were outside answering a call. That call was from her, wasn't it? She was telling you that Minnie was at her place and she had let what you did slip to her. Minnie was going on and on about you being a good friend and that she wasn't going to let Naledi do to you what she did to that guy at 16, and that's when Naledi lost it. She just blurted it out that you weren't no saint. She told Minnie what you did to that girl. And that, Chris, is what Minnie wanted to tell me."

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-Chris: "Baby, wait. Lemme explain."

-Sthandiwe: "Explain what, Chris? That you were sure that Minnie was infuriated by the fact that you wanted a rape to be swept under the rug and that that resulted in that girl killing herself? She had every right to be furious, Chris. And truth is, so do I... And you knew how I'd react if I got to know that you were sleeping with another woman. Also, as a rape survivor myself you knew that my reaction to the news of what you did wasn't going to be pleasant so you had to do something to make sure that it didn't get to me. And you thought even if for some reason I had let it go, Minnie wouldn't. You thought she wouldn't let it go because you knew how she felt about rapists. Your first thought was that she would report it and you would get in trouble, so you manipulated the unstable Naledi. You had her do your scut work for you. You told her to take care of it, you told her to remove Minnie, and you told her if she didn't do it you would go to prison and she would have no one. And you told her how to do it. You're the one who knew that Minnie had a troubled past, and you thought if she OD'ed

on drugs no one would ask questions. But guess what, I did... What makes me sick is that you gave that kill order, Chris. You ordered a hit on my friend."

She now could no longer hold it in. She just broke down in tears, tears of anger and hurt.

-Sthandiwe: "You're deep, Christopher, and I don't know if I'd ever forgive what you did. I mean I know that I aint no saint either, I've killed people, but I would never do what you did to family. I PROTECT family. Minnie was family, Chris. You don't do what you did to family. You never kill your own... But you did. You did to cover your own ass. And then you acted shocked. You acted as if you were also hurt by her death, but that was just that - an act. You looked me and Xolisa in the eye and lied to us. You acted as if you were sympathising with us but deep down you knew what you had done. Do you know how sickening that is?"

She stopped and wiped her tears.

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Chris came to sit next to her and covered her hand with both of his.

-Sthandiwe: "You better take your hands off of me, Chris...now."

He removed them, slowly.

-Chris: "I know that 'wrong' doesn't even begin to describe what I did. And I'm sorry that I did it and that you had to hear about it from someone else. One wrong decision that I made led from one tragedy to another, it forced me to make more wrong decisions. I just didn't know what to do."

-Sthandiwe: "You could have come to me, Chris. You could have come clean and we would have handled the whole situation together. You didn't have to turn the situation into this mess that you've now created. But no you didn't do that. You opted for a despicable way. How could you do what you did, Chris? How could you?... Last year when Minnie wanted to commit suicide we rescued her together, you and I. And I remember how grateful she was later. She was grateful that we had saved her life. And she later got to save mine too. After you had broken off our engagement, I also found myself wanting to take my own life, but a call from Minnie helped me hold on. And now you have taken that friend away from me, Chris. You saved her life only for you to take it later. Wow."

She gave a mirthless laugh.

-Sthandiwe: "And Xolisa is your friend. You had your friend's sister killed. And what makes it worse is that you didn't even have to do it. It was a senseless murder. There were other ways you could have handled the situation. Now tell me, how am I ever gonna be able to look at Xolisa knowing what I know? Chris, I'm not like you."

-Chris: "Thandi, you gotta understand that..."

-Sthandiwe: "No, let me finish. What makes me sick to my stomach, Chris, is that you pretended as if you were helping me figure out what had happened to her even though you knew exactly what had

happened. You looked me in the eye and made a fool of me. We went to Cape Town together and in your pretense of helping out you offered to call Claire. You were just doing it so it would seem like you were helping, but she unknowingly opened an escape route for you when she told you about Lwethu. You knew Lwethu through Naledi even though you two weren't too familiar with each other, but you didn't know that she was also Minnie's friend until Claire told you about it. And now that she did, you saw an opportunity. How calculating."

Chris covered his face with his hands again. As it seemed, there was nothing Sthandiwe didn't know.

-Sthandiwe: "To your surprise Naledi bypassed security and came up to your apartment that day. And when you saw her, you pulled your acting skills again just so I wouldn't know exactly what was going on. But you later apologised to her. I remember on our way to see Lwethu you asked me to drive because you were too busy on your Whatsapp. Now I know what you were busy with. You were chatting with Naledi, apologising for being a jerk and for me punching her. And it didn't end there. You also asked her to call Lwethu and instruct her to lie to me. You wanted Lwethu to tell me that Minnie was using. You figured if I knew Minnie was a junkie I would accept that she had OD'ed on her own. But that plan didn't work because Lwethu's phone died before Naledi could call her and their power was out. So she told me nothing but the truth... You know me, Chris, so much that I'm now predictable to you. You knew that when you told me about Lwethu I would want to talk to her myself and that's exactly what I did. We were gonna meet with her at that filling station and I was gonna get out of the car to talk to her in private and she wasn't gonna see your face. That's why when I suggested that we go to her house you said something about not being comfortable with leaving your car unattended. But it wasn't about your car, Chris, it was about you. You just didn't wanna come with me to those shacks because you didn't want Lwethu to see you. And you knew that I wouldn't send you to talk to her alone. You knew that I'd wanna go myself and you'd remain behind pretending to be keeping an eye on your car. Jesus, Chris, you kept making a fool of me and using me. And I hate that."

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She got up and took her handbag.

-Chris: "You're leaving? Baby, come on you can't leave. We have to talk about this. I'm sorry."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm not leaving yet, I just don't wanna sit next to you."

She went to sit on another couch.

-Sthandiwe: "Your Lwethu plan hadn't worked but another opportunity to get yourself out of that mess presented itself when my PI came to the apartment to tell me about Naledi. And when I connected those dots using Sihle's views, that was your escape. Like I said, you know me too well, Chris, and you used that to your advantage. You know how I react when someone hurts me or the people I care about. You knew that if Naledi confessed to killing Minnie I'd wanna squeeze the life out of her right then and there. And that would solve all your problems. You were using me, Chris. You were using me and the sad part is that I wasn't even aware. You were even pretending when you said

you thought I was leaving violence behind. And when I said I wasn't leaving anything behind, I gave you what you wanted. You were actually glad. You wanted me to kill that woman for you. But of course you could have done it yourself a while back when she was blackmailing you. But hey, killing someone isn't easy. All the kills that you made you made them while you were in fight or flight mode, it was either you or them. Even Alizwa, you first gave him an option to leave the city. You didn't wanna kill him, but he turned on you, he wanted to shoot you then you had to kill him. Same thing with Naledi, you couldn't kill her, not when there was another option - which is screwing her until you get that USB device. But now that it wasn't happening and you were in even more deeper shit, you wanted me to kill her for you without me even knowing. Wow, it sucks to be me."

She gave another mirthless laugh. Chris was mute, sure he didn't know what to say for himself now that everything was out in the open.

-Sthandiwe: "I remember when we were downstairs at the parking replacing the registration plates on your car, you left saying you wanted something back at your apartment. Now I know that you went there to make a phone call to Naledi. You played the woman like a putty in your hands, she isn't okay upstairs and she's in love with you, which made her susceptible to your manipulations. Hell, love can make even a sane person do crazy things... You asked Naledi to confess to the murder to me. And when she refused afraid to go to jail, you convinced her that you would get her out, but of course you thought it would never get to that because I would kill her. You told her that I was closing in on the truth and that if she didn't confess I would continue digging until I get to the truth, the entire truth. You told her that if I were to find out that you were involved in Minnie's murder I wouldn't spare you, I'd want you arrested. And you made her see how bad that would be. You told her that it would be better if she would take the fall for the entire thing, because if you were to be implicated your career would go down the drain even if you get out of prison, and if that happens you wouldn't be able to take care of her. You convinced her that you have a lot to lose than her. And you made a promise that if she confesses and keep your name out of it you would get her out of jail and you would continue taking care of her."

She stopped and chuckled.

-Sthandiwe: "You know, the more I talk about this the more twisted I see it. It's like a bad movie."

-Chris: "Would you allow me to say something now?"

-Sthandiwe: "Not before I finish telling you what I know... Do you remember pretending as if you didn't know where Naledi's house was when we were looking for her address in Kuyasa that day? You really had me fooled. You had been there a number of times before, Chris. Only difference is that you had never been there with your car, you'd take rides with her... And do you remember what you said when we got there? You wanted to go in first. I didn't know why at the time but now I do. You wanted to go in because you wanted to make sure that she'd stick to the plan. I wouldn't let you go in but to your relief she did stick to the plan. However, to your damning surprise I acted out of character, I didn't do anything to Naledi. I didn't kill her. You know why? Because I felt for the woman. I understood that she's sick and she wasn't in her right state of mind when she committed that murder. But when I didn't do what you wanted me to do, you wanted XO to do it. He got there angry as hell and all he wanted was to pull that trigger. Exactly what you wanted. But I talked him down, and you used that time to take out those bullets leaving just the one in the chamber. You wanted him to use

that bullet but you took out the rest because you wanted it to look like you were helping and you only left that one by mistake. So in addition to making a fool of me and Xolisa, you tried to use us to do your dirty work for you, just like you used Naledi. And that makes me so angry, Christopher. And I don't even know if I'd ever get past everything you have done. All this just makes me wonder what else are you hiding from me. It makes me wonder if you have any other schemes you're involved in. All I know is that you're a liar, you're deep and you make me sick...And how the hell am I gonna look at Xolisa now if I don't tell him the truth?"

She got up again, ready to leave this time around.

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But Chris got up and blocked her way.

-Chris: "Baby, baby, wait. We gotta talk about this. I know that what I did is wrong. But I didn't mean for things to turn out the way they did. I was just in an impossible situation and I was only trying to get myself out. But the only thing I managed to do was to dig myself deeper into trouble... Sthandwa sam, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry for everything I've done and for putting you in this position. But, babe, what I did had nothing to do with how I feel about you. I love you, Thandi. I'm still the same guy that you know. And I'm not hiding anything else from you. Please don't walk out on me. And please, I'm begging you, don't tell Xolisa about this."

Sthandiwe didn't say anything. She just asked him to step aside. And when he finally did, she made for the door. But she only took a few steps and stopped. She turned to look at him.

-Sthandiwe: "And oh, by the way now Naledi also knows the kind of person you are. She figured it out when you didn't go see her in custody. But for some reason she kept hoping, well up until I showed up and we talked... You wanted to stick around Cape Town but it wasn't for the reason you gave me. You wanted to go to Naledi's house and look for that USB, and you did. You rainsacked the place until you found it. That's why you're now back, you think you've won. But what you didn't know is that Naledi made a copy. I guess deep down she knew that you couldn't be trusted. But anyway she was blackmailing you...She didn't keep the copy on her phone or online where it would be vulnerable. She kept it on another USB and she told me where to find it. Right in her house, taped to the curtain rail... I saw that girl's video with my own two eyes, Chris."

-Chris: "Now what are you gonna do with the video? Baby, please you cannot use that video."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm done talking. And please, from now on I'm gonna need you to keep your distance and give me my space... Oh and Naledi is home now."

And with that she walked to the door. Chris wanted to stop her but then he decided against it. He let her go.

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She stepped outside and it was now raining. She walked to her car in the driveway but she didn't get in. She just leaned on the driver's side door and let the rain pour down on her, as if by doing so it would wash away the guilt she was feeling inside for thinking about keeping the whole thing from Minenhle's brother, her friend, Xolisa. She was even thinking of keeping it from Sihle too.

She stood like that for a few moments then got inside the car. Chris had already opened the gate, so she drove out, then the gate closed behind. But she had barely driven down the street when two cars came behind her. Another passed and blocked the street in front of her and the other did the same behind. What the hell? She stopped but didn't get out of the car. Her heart was now pounding faster, scared. Was this carjacking? If it was, she told herself that she would just let them take the car as long as they would spare her life. But a carjacking in that residential area? As she was still wondering, Anthony Parker, Renee's father, came out of the back seat of the car that was behind her. She was looking at the rear view mirror as he walked out. And immediately when she saw him all the fear she had quickly fled, she just felt sick to her stomach.

-Sthandiwe: (to herself) "Oh hayi nkosiyam ufuna ntoni ngoku lo tata? [Oh God no, what does this man want now?] This is really not my day."

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Anthony took baby steps towards Sthandiwe's car as two of his men, who seemed like bodyguards, stood by the car he had just come out of. It was still raining but he didn't seem to mind getting wet. Maybe it was because the rain was soft and it was bringing some relief, that cooling effect after a scorching hot day.

Sthandiwe tried to remain calm but inside, her stomach was turning over with a mixture of fear and frustration. She wasn't looking forward to hearing whatever he was going to say, however she had no choice but to listen to him. As he was getting closer, she opened the door and got out of the car. She just had to talk to him outside, and she also couldn't deny how good that rain felt on the skin, especially because she was wearing a sleeveless dress. It was really refreshing.

"Miss Blie."

He said as he came to stand in front of her, and motioned for the car that was blocking the street in front of her car to drive around to the back.

-Sthandiwe: "It's Doctor Blie, actually. Anyway, what can I do for you, sir?"

Anthony Parker is a man who radiates authority and confidence. His aura exudes supreme authority and you just can't help but show him some respect. Which is exactly what Sthandiwe was willing to show him in spite of everything.

-Anthony: "Young lady, if you really knew who I am you'd know that I don't give a fuck whether you're a doctor or a professor."

The way he said that, with so much arrogance, made Sthandiwe reconsider showing him some respect.

-Anthony: "Where's the punk that killed my ex-wife?"

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, you want to know about Kagiso. Then what's with the theatrics? If you wanted to talk to me all you had to do was go to my house and talk to me like a civilised adult. What is this you're doing now blocking my way? And how the hell did you even know where I'd be? What, you've been following me?"

-Anthony: "I haven't been following you, I had you followed, there's a difference. You're hardly home, young lady. Hence I did this. Now back to my question. Where's Kagiso?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know. I also want to find him. Actually, a lot of people, including the police, are looking for him, so join the club."

-Anthony: "You think you're smart, huh?"

-Sthandiwe: "I'm a lot of things and there are lot of words that I personally use to describe myself but 'smart' never even once made the list."

-Anthony: "First, you wreck my daughter's marriage. Second, the mother of my children gets shot by an unknown assailant riding your motorcycle. You claim it was stolen but later it turns out that the assailant is actually your best friend. Thirdly, you shoot my son in your house and you claim he was an intruder and you shot him in self defense. Next, my daughter gets arrested and she ends up dead in her cell. They say it's heart attack but I know that my daughter was strong and healthy as a race horse. Then a couple of weeks ago, my former son-in-law, who you were having an affair with, gets gunned down in his home and all the evidence is wiped clean. Now tell me, who's the common factor in all these incidents? You, of course. And I'll tell you this much, young lady, I know that you're the cockroach that wiped my entire family. And I know that you had Kagiso skip the country to escape justice. And I'll also tell you this, I SQUASH cockroaches."

-Sthandiwe: "I can hear you talking but I'll tell you this much, SIR, I don't know what you're talking about."

In all honesty, she was scared. The man is powerful and she knew what he could do to her. But she still managed to maintain her composure because she understood that the one thing you don't do in front of your enemy is to show them that you're scared, otherwise they will capitalise on that.

-Anthony: "Little girl, I'm not here to play games with you. I saw the airport footage, you sending Kagiso and his girlfriend off about two weeks ago. And it turns out they were heading to Brazil. You know that you are gonna be in trouble for this, right? Aiding and abetting a criminal is a punishable offence. Your only chance out of this is to bring him back here to face the law."

-Sthandiwe: "Like I said, I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't know what you think you saw but I'll tell you this: yes, the last time I saw Kagiso was at the airport. They were there to wait for a friend that was coming from Cape Town, but I couldn't wait with them because I was leaving, I was going to drive to Eastern Cape that day. So I said my goodbyes to them and went back to my car. I don't know what happened next. I don't know anything about Brazil. And I certainly didn't aid anyone. I have proof of what I'm talking about. Question is, do you have proof of what you're talking about?"

Anthony chuckled.

-Anthony: "You really think you're smart, aren't you?"

-Sthandiwe: "You're not gonna do anything to me, Mr Parker, because I'm innocent of everything that you're accusing me of. Well, you're not gonna do anything within the bounds of the law because you have no proof of anything. But outside the law, I know that you'll come after me. But before you do that please remember Goliath and David's story. You may be powerful, Mr Parker, but you won't walk all over me. If you wanna come after me, you better come prepared for a war. And now if you don't mind I'd like to go home. You have yourself a nice evening now, sir."

Her voice was stern and didn't demonstrate any fear even though she was scared as hell. And when she was done talking, she quickly got inside her car without waiting for Anthony to say anything else, and she locked the doors. Anthony stood there for a moment then walked back to his car.

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Sthandiwe had always been afraid of Anthony, which is exactly why she accepted the fact that KG would completely disappear with no form of communication whatsoever with everyone left behind. She knew just how resourceful Anthony was, she knew that he could use them to get to KG if they kept in contact. She wanted KG to disappear from him more than she wanted him to disappear from the police. Now finding herself talking to him the way she'd just did came as a shock to her too. She didn't even know where she got the guts from but she was glad she was no longer in front of him. She let out a sigh of relief as she watched his cars drive away. But deep down she knew that this was far from over, in fact it hadn't even begun. Without a doubt Anthony was going to make her life unbearable and despite what she'd just said to him, she didn't know how she would deal with him or even where to begin. She knew that she was no match for him, she was just the cockroach he said she was, and that made her shake in her boots.

She looked at her wrist watch, well KG's, the one he gave to her the day he left. She'd been wearing it everyday since the day he left just to feel closer to him. She looked at it for a long moment, wondering where he could be or how he was doing wherever he was.

Out of all the bullshit she'd just told Anthony, only one thing was true: she didn't know where KG was. And it was a good thing that she didn't know, she found herself admitting that to herself out loud. Then she started the car and drove off. The stress in her life was surely mounting and she didn't have any idea how to deal with any of it.

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She drove in silence, her mind preoccupied, until she got distracted by the ringing of her cellphone. It was Sihle and she answered.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey."

-Sihle: "Hey, so what's up? I need an update."

-Sthandiwe: "An update about what?"

-Sihle: "You said you felt like Chris was hiding something from you and you were going to look into it. So have you found anything?"

Sthandiwe was still not sure about what she wanted to do with the information she had found. So until she made a final decision she didn't want anyone else to know about it.

-Sthandiwe: "I haven't found anything yet. Maybe there's nothing to find, you know. Maybe I'm just being paranoid, chomi."

-Sihle: "Exactly what I thought. So just drop the whole thing and focus on your wedding. How does that sound?"

-Sthandiwe: "It sounds good, I guess."

She said as she came to a halt at the red robots behind an Avanza that was written, "Family is the greatest treasure" at the back. That got her thinking. It would really be nice to have more blood family on her side, people who genuinely loved her and won't pretend to be something they are not, not people like Chris.

Sihle was talking on the other end of the phone but she wasn't listening. Her mind had trailed off. And when it got back she just cut Sihle off.

-Sthandiwe: "Chomi, wait, listen. Can I ask you for a favour?"

-Sihle: "Of course. We're friends, Thandi. I told you that whenever you need help just shout. So, what do you need?"

-Sthandiwe: "I never told you about this. Maybe it's because I never really cared about it, I never gave it the time of day."

-Sihle: "What are you talking about."

-Sthandiwe: "There's this guy that came to my house two weeks ago. He said he's my cousin, from my mother's side. He's British, with the accent and all. He says he's now in the country because the company that he works for has transferred him here. Now what I need you to do is to use your contacts and look into him, find out if he's really who he says he is. I wanna find out what he does, what his story is, the whole 9, before I let him into my life. Now, I know you're always busy so I don't know if you'll be able to do this for me but..."

-Sihle: (cutting her off) "Hey, hey, don't worry, it'll be done. Yes, you're right I'm always busy but I'll give the assignment to someone else to do it, a former colleague of mine. If there's someone who can do this for you quickly it's him. He's got contacts, he'll get it done."

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks, chomi. I'll text you the info I have. It's not much though. I only have his name, the name of the hotel he's staying in, the room number and his phone number. That's all."

-Sihle: "It'll do. And sorry, I gotta go now. My son needs me."

-Sthandiwe: "Sure. I owe you one."

She hung up and paced the car home. She really needed to know if this guy was genuinely her cousin. And if he was then she would do the right thing and let him into her life.

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It was around 19:00 when she got home. She went to park her car in the garage then texted Sihle everything she knew about her potential cousin, recalling everything from memory. Then she went inside the house. And she got welcomed by nothing but a haunting cold. She stood in the middle of the living room and looked around. Her tears just fell.

There was a time when coming home was pure bliss and calming to the soul. When her parents were still alive she loved coming to this house, it was a warm home filled with love and laughter, but now it was just a cold empty house. Even after her parents were gone, there would still be laughter in the house, she would hang out with her friends, Sihle and Palesa, and just fool around this very living room, and sometimes they would spend the night. Then came Chris and KG, other people who made this house warm and livable. But now all it held was memories and she had lost all of those people, well except for Sihle. Sihle who was always busy with work and her own family. But even if she wasn't busy she couldn't exactly help her at this moment, because there were certain facts that she couldn't share with her as of yet. What she needed now was a friend that she could offload everything to. That would be KG if he was still around. God, she really missed him and she missed how they used to talk about anything and everything. And how he would make some things that she thought serious feel less serious by turning them into jokes. In all honesty, she trusted him more than any other friend she had. But he was now gone. And here she was, feeling all alone and empty. She had lost everyone. If she was ever a captain, she was now a captain of an empty ship.

And even if she really was to fight the powerful Anthony, it was going to be her and what army? Because Xolisa too was still busy dealing with his sister's death. And chances were he wouldn't remain

her friend for long if she didn't plan her next step carefully as far as exposing the mastermind behind his sister's death was concerned.

She stood like that for what felt like eternity, her heart shattering into pieces inside her own chest. Feeling empty inside has got to be the worst feeling ever.

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She eventually pulled herself together and went upstairs. She got to the laundry room, stripped naked and put everything she was wearing in the washing machine. Then she went to her bedroom and into the en-suite bathroom to take a shower. She turned the water on and let it cascade down on her. She enjoyed how it hit her head and cascaded down to the floor as if it was cleansing her anger, frustrations, and the other concoction of emotions she was feeling because of Chris. She eventually came out, dried herself and put on her pyjamas.

She had already pushed the Anthony issue to the back of her head, what she needed to focus on at the moment was figuring out what she was going to do with the information she got in Cape Town. On one hand she had her friends, Xolisa and Minenhle. Minenhle had lost her life and she deserved justice. And Xolisa deserved to know what happened to his sister. On the other hand she had Chris, the man who had paid lobola [dowry] for her. Does she sell him out by exposing what she did to both Minenhle and that girl patient? And of course that girl was also in play. Sthandiwe herself was that girl at some point. She experienced what that girl went through - being sexually violated and being reduced to nothing but an empty shell by a man. Now the question was, does she make sure that that girl gets justice even from beyond the grave by using the video she had to expose what that psychiatrist pig did to her? But if she did that she would also be getting Chris in trouble. Yes, as a rape survivor herself she hated what Chris did to that girl, she hated it to the core and it was making her blood boil, hell HE was making her blood boil, but ending his career and getting him in trouble with the law didn't feel right or easy. So does she betray her friend and that girl to protect the man that put a ring on her finger? Deep down she knew what the right to do would be but she found her moral compass going haywire.

She sat down on the bed and put on some music on her iPod touch which she hadn't used in a while. She connected it to its speaker dock and laid back on the pillows, eyes closed and let the music work its magic on her. It had been a while since she used music therapy but she now needed it. Music would feed her soul, it would force her to face her emotions and it would clear her mind and help her think straight. And at that moment that's exactly what she needed.

She kept playing different scenarios in her head but still, she couldn't reach a decision. She was at a crossroads and she didn't know which one to take. And both her body and mind were now exhausted, so she decided to sleep on it AGAIN. And she set a 6 o'clock alarm so she would wake up and go for a run, her doctor had okayed that.

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The alarm went off in the morning but both her head and heart were heavy, she didn't feel like waking up at all.

Fifteen minutes lapsed before she finally forced herself up. She started by putting some feel good music on her iPod just to lift up her mood and get her ready for the day. And it got her dancing and singing along as she made her bed. Then she went to the bathroom to clean her face and brush her teeth. After that she put on her jogging clothes and went downstairs to the kitchen. She had warm lemon water and two energy bars, the last thing she wanted was to faint out there. It had been a long time since she went for a morning run but it was now time to get her life back, one step at a time.

During her reflection session the previous night it became clear to her that she hadn't just lost everyone but herself too. Before she met Chris or Alizwa, yes she had no man but she was living an uncomplicated life, a life that was fulfilling to her. She had her friends, a fulfilling job and everything else. But things started going sideways when she met Chris and he had to move back to Cape Town, then she allowed Alizwa into her life and he threw it into absolute turmoil. From there things went downhill. Her life became busy, hectic - in an unfortunate way - until now. Now she had no job, no friends, no man, nothing to look forward to. She had quit her job and even turned down an opportunity to go study abroad because of a man, Chris who had just turned out to be not what she thought he was. God, she was a little mad at herself for that.

Life had really happened to her. And now she had nothing to do. She had even abandoned the simple Saturday routine that she made for herself, a routine she had followed for years. When was the last time she visited her parents graves just to clean them? When was the last time she volunteered her time to help out at the House for children with cancer in Soweto? When was the last time she sat down with a struggling student and showed them a simpler and better way to tackle a challenging assignment productively and efficiently or a positive way to approach the entire module or course?

There was a time where she felt useful to others but not anymore. Now she just felt like a waste of space on this planet. She was adding no value to anyone's life. And she was now even at a point where a huge part of her was considering betraying a friend, something she was always against. She was considering keeping the truth about what happened to Minenhle from Xolisa. In all honesty, a huge part of her was considering burying the truth once and for all. As bad as that was, she was really considering it. What was becoming of her? Something had to change.

Anyway, when she was done filling up she went for her run.

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Getting back to running after taking a break from it for that long was difficult. She remembered how she used to run up to 4 kilometres nonstop. She was so proud of herself, but life happened and she got distracted. Once you stop it's really hard to get your endurance back up, it was difficult for her too. She knew that there was no way she could make that 4 kilometres but she would keep looking at her distance watch and say 'let me just make it one nonstop kilometre for today'. But she was getting

exhausted and that kilometre seemed like an impossible goal. She would look at the watch and get so frustrated that she was that tired and not even halfway there. She just got so disappointed and started to walk. She even considered quitting and walk back, until she remembered what she used to say to motivate herself when she started years back: that it's not about speed, its about endurance. She thought about those scriptures that say, "the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong...it's to the one who endureth to the end." So she started running again and decided not to look at the watch, not to watch the time or the distance she still had to cover, but to just focus on what was right in front of her, one step at a time. The task at hand was not looking up but just thanking God for where she was at that moment. And before she knew it she had run two kilometres. She had to thank God for that two kilometres, yes it wasn't four, but it was a great start for her to get back to the four.

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As she celebrated with her hands in the air, it made her think of life in so many ways. It made her think of how she had set out with these huge goals for herself and now they were seeming so hard to reach. She was now 28 and her goals were that by age 29 she should be done with her PhD, be among South Africa's best Science researchers, and be married with her own family. But life made those goals seem impossible. So impossible that even when she had one victory she didn't stop to notice. She had managed to finish her PhD at the age of 26 and graduated for it at age 27. Not everyone gets that but because she had set other huge goals for herself, goals that were seeming impossible, she didn't see that as a big achievement. And the sad part is that she's not the only one guilty of this, many others are like her. We set goals for ourselves and they sometimes seem impossible, and when we have small victories we don't even stop to notice them, we don't stop and say, "God, thank you for where I am right now." Life and its circumstances distract us, and we get frustrated because we feel that we're running out of time. You may not be at your goal yet, but what you need to know is that with each step you get closer. Take some time to stop and thank God for where you are, stop focusing so hard on the finish line and enjoy the race. Each step toward your goal is a victory, you can't get overwhelmed with how far you still have to go, you just need to focus on one step at a time and keep going.

She had her PhD, and she could manage her health condition, and still be one of the best Science researchers. And because Chris had disappointed her that didn't mean she wouldn't get married someday and have that family she wanted. She just had to take things one step at a time, stop putting pressure on herself and thank God for where she was at the moment and for being alive.

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She walked back home in high spirits and looking forward to getting her life back on track. But when she walked up her driveway her mood just dropped down to zero. Chris was standing in her front

porch and she was just in no mood to talk to him. Yes, she was considering letting him off the hook, and not expose him, but being with him and continuing like nothing had happened was near impossible. She just couldn't get past what he did and she was no longer seeing a future together.

"What are you doing here, Chris? You're here to kill me too?"

She asked as she leaned on the burglar gate a few steps from where he was standing.

He looked so handsome as always, even she couldn't deny that.

He exuded comfort and coolness in his blue ripped jeans, crispy white D&G T-shirt and plain white low-cut D&G sneakers. White complements his light skin tone very well. It makes him look even more bright and neat, and the fact that he's a neat freak himself makes him look even more appealing to the eye.

He opened his thin, pink lips to speak. She always teased him about those lips saying they were too thin for a black guy and that they made him look like a fish. But jokes aside, she loved them. She loved the feeling of them on hers and mmh the way they tasted.

-Chris: "It pains me to hear you say that. I would never do that to you, Thandi. I'm only here to talk to you. You didn't give me a chance to talk yesterday and I owe you an explanation."

She really loved this man but things were now more than just complicated.

-Sthandiwe: "What you owe me, Chris, is your absence. I thought I asked you to keep your distance."

-Chris: "You know that's not easy, right?... And, Thandi, there are always three sides to every story. In this case, there's my former patient's side, my side and the right side."

-Sthandiwe: "And what side are you going to give me? Your side or the right side?"

-Chris: "The right side."

-Sthandiwe: "And I'm supposed to foolishly believe that, huh? Chris, do I have to remind you that you have already deceived me by pretending to be on my side on this Minnie thing? I can no longer trust anything that comes out of your mouth, Christopher. And you can't tell me that that girl lied on that video. Chris, she was going to kill herself when she made that video, so she had no reason to lie."

-Chris: "She exaggerated the facts, Thandi, and she added some extensions. That's the truth. And now all I ask is a chance to explain myself."

-Sthandiwe: "I'm sure you cooked up some lies in your head when you were laying in your bed last night. But sorry, I don't want to hear them. And whatever happened with that girl doesn't change the fact that you had Minnie killed. And that is something I can't forgive. Now please leave my property."

He didn't say anything, he just came closer to her. Not trusting her own body, she tried to move back. But there was a burglar gate behind her so she stopped trying. He came so close until their bodies were a few of inches apart. She could smell his hypnotising fragrance and when he looked into her eyes she swore her heart skipped more than one beat and she could feel her temperature rising. Yeah, he still had that effect on her. She used to love it but now, because of the current situation of their relationship, she hated it.

-Chris: "I'm sorry...for everything."

That came out as a whisper. And Sthandiwe could feel his warm breath on her neck, making her lose all senses.

She didn't say anything, she couldn't. And Chris didn't wait, he walked away. Leaving her standing there. She stood there for a moment, catching her breath then she walked inside the house.

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Walking away from Chris was definitely not going to be easy. Not only because she was, of course, still in love with him but also because he had paid lobola for her. Traditionally they were already married, they were no longer just dating. Both their families were now involved in their union, it was no longer just about them. What was she going to tell them?

She let out a deep sigh then went upstairs to take a shower. After that she put on a robe then went downstairs to make herself some breakfast. Which was just two peanut butter and jam sandwiches and freshly squeezed lemon juice. She had been eating a lot of those peanut butter sandwiches lately. Even though her appetite was always off, she would find herself craving those sandwiches. And it was a good thing that they were approved by her doctor. She sat down to eat then went back upstairs to get dressed. It was now Friday and she had an appointment with the Hepatologist. So after getting dressed she left.

The Hepatologist had already read her medical file so he just asked her a few questions then prescribed her some medication. But he ordered her to never take any other medication, both prescription and over the counter, as it could possibly cause more damage to her liver. And he advised her on what to eat and told her to get vaccinated against flu and hepatitis A and B. Then he gave her another date to come see him. She now had to pop into the doctor's office more frequently. Annoying. But for her health she was willing to do it.

That was it for the day, and she left. On the way home, Sihle called. She was telling her that Palesa's mom had called asking for her help. She'd asked her to help Chris pack Palesa's stuff from her apartment after work because they now wanted to give the apartment up. And now Sihle was asking her to also come help because Palesa had a lot of stuff, and she had left it all behind.

Sthandiwe hesitated, she didn't want to be in the same room as Chris. But she couldn't tell Sihle that, so she ended up agreeing to come.

She went home to rest then drove to Palesa's apartment later. She found Sihle already there and they started doing what they were there to do. And fortunately for her, Chris couldn't make it. Maybe it was because he'd heard that she was there. Whatever the reason was, she was relieved.

She was in the bathroom getting some things out of the medicine cabinet when she noticed a fake back panel. She removed it and behind it she found a bottle of Lutalyse sterile solution, an injection for animals. She remembered it from her mother's veterinarian friend. He said it was for inducing abortion in cattle, and that's the only thing she remembered. So what was Palesa doing with it? Was

she planning to use it to abort her own baby? But why would she do that? I mean come on she knew better than that, there are doctors for safe abortion if she didn't want the baby she was carrying. And the bottle was half full, meaning it had been used. That didn't make sense because according to her understanding Palesa was still pregnant when she left. So why did she have this drug in her possession? And why was it hidden?

Dangerous Love

Insert #100

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Yeah, we've been a family for that long. Now let's celebrate this 100th episode by liking and commenting more on it .

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"Don't you find it weird that your mother-in-law called me and not you to come and do this?"

That was Sihle. She asked as she came to lean on the bathroom door, derailing Sthandiwe's train of thoughts.

Sthandiwe quickly put the Lutalyse bottle in the sink, not wanting her to see it. Then she turned to her.

-Sthandiwe: "Actually, no. I told you that the woman has a problem with me these days. I don't know why and quite frankly, I don't care. What I'm sure of is that if her son and I don't make it to the altar she'd be very glad."

-Sihle: "But that won't happen. You and Chris are gonna say your 'I dos' in less than two months. And I've already talked to that wedding planner, she's ready to see us tomorrow. We're lucky she's willing to work with us at such short notice."

Sthandiwe sighed. She was still having some serious doubts about her wedding but avoiding to have to explain, she didn't want Sihle to know about it. She just faked a smile.

-Sthandiwe: "Oh, thanks chomi. The time?"

-Sihle: "Twelve o'clock. I'll come with her to your place."

-Sthandiwe: "Great."

Not comfortable with the subject, she quickly changed it.

-Sthandiwe: "So your ex-colleague, when do you think he's gonna have something for me?"

-Sihle: "Come on, I just talked to the guy this morning. It's gonna take at least a few days."

-Sthandiwe: "Yah, yah you're right... Anyway, you don't happen to know if Lisa knew any vets around, do you?"

-Sihle: "Vets?"

Knowing Sihle, she was going to want to know why she was asking before she could answer. Shit, she should have thought of that before she asked. Because she didn't want to tell her the real reason why she was asking, at least not now.

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. I...ummh, it's just that I just saw some pamphlets on veterinary science in her stuff. I didn't know she was interested in that field."

-Sihle: "I don't think she was. But she did have a friend who's a vet."

-Sthandiwe: "She did?"

-Sihle: "Yeah. Some guy she apparently went to high school with. I think she said he's now based in Maritzburg. But he was around last year, around October."

-Sthandiwe: "Before or after I left for Okinawa?"

-Sihle: "Before. But I'm sure you don't know about him because you were busy with your own things and the guy was only around for just a few days. It was no big deal anyway."

-Sthandiwe: "And he hasn't come back this year?"

-Sihle: "If he did, he didn't tell Lisa about it. And why are we wasting time getting deeper into this anyway? Girl, let's just finish up here, I need to go home to my boys."

With that she turned and walked back to the lounge area where she was packing other boxes, leaving Sthandiwe with some knots in her stomach. Something was not feeling right about this whole thing. Palesa couldn't just have Lutalyse for animal use in her possession. She must have gotten it from that vet friend of hers. And the fact that Sihle said the guy was only around in October, the same month she had her miscarriage, didn't seem like coincidence to her. And the bottle was half full, meaning it was used. Used on what? On whom? For what purpose? Was it possible that she used it on her to induce her abortion without her knowing? But Palesa wasn't around to answer those questions, and that was frustrating. But how could she do that to her? How could she poison her? And why would she do it if she did? However, she quickly answered her last question: the baby she was carrying wasn't her brother's, that could have driven her to do it. But still, that was no justification. It was cruel.

She was suddenly not in the mood to continue packing this woman's stuff. Everything about her just repulsed her now. How could she do that to her? But then again she had no proof that she did it, she had no proof that she was behind her losing her baby. Until she had it, it would be better for her to not jump to conclusions or speculate. But that wasn't going to be easy. And she couldn't stick around anymore, she just had to get out of there before she lost it. She took the drug bottle, put it in her pocket and walked out of the bathroom. She went to grab her handbag and told Sihle that she was leaving. As expected, Sihle didn't understand but Sthandiwe wasn't about to wait for her to. She

walked out. She just had to clear her head. The thought of her friend poisoning her to kill her unborn baby was just too much and it couldn't leave her head.

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She decided to take the stairs down, not the elevator. Her body needed the exercise. As she was descending to the lobby, there Chris was, talking to security.

Her mind started racing. If Palesa really poisoned her, did Chris know about it? Were they in it together? Thinking about that wasn't a stretch considering what he did to Minenhle. She now knew what he was capable of. She now knew how deep he was. He had proven that he doesn't mind hurting even the people closest to him as long as that would favour him. God, the thought of that literally stopped her in her tracks, before she could finish the stairs down.

Her instincts were telling her to walk back up the stairs, now, before he looked up and saw her. She was just not ready to talk to him. But before she could make that lame move, her attention got drawn to a sound made by suitcases of a woman of her age group who had just came out of the elevator. The sound from the friction caused by the wheels of her two suitcases against the tiles was just attracting attention. She was dragging them across the small lobby to the exit, where Chris and the security guy were standing.

Seeing her, Chris kindly held the door open for her. Sthandiwe was watching. She found herself smiling as she remembered the kind of gentleman he'd always been.

-The Woman: "Thanks."

She said with an inviting little smile.

-Chris: "No problem."

He responded mildly, probably now realising, just as Sthandiwe was, that this woman now had another agenda entirely.

-The Woman: "Do you also live here? I've never seen you around here before."

-Chris: "No, actually I'm just going up to my sister's apartment."

-The Woman: "Maybe you should visit MY apartment sometime. For dinner. Just to say thanks for this."

She said, her expression undeniably seductive. Chris' mouth compressed.

-Chris: "Sorry, I don't think my wife would approve. But thanks for the offer."

He replied pleasantly. The woman's smile disappeared, and with a shrug she walked out. Chris just shook his head and turned back to the security guy he seemed to be well acquainted with.

Sthandiwe was still watching and her heart couldn't help but smile at how he responded to the woman. But still, that didn't change the fact that she was now finding it hard to trust him. The thought of sleeping next to him knowing what he was capable of was unsettling, to say the least. It was no longer just about Minenhle's murder itself, it was about the fact that she was now scared of the person she'd come to know him to be. She'd always known him as this gentle soul who always cared about others, but not anymore. If he could do what he did to Minenhle and Xolisa - a friend he claimed to care about, could she trust him not to do it to her when push comes to shove?

Her thoughts got disturbed when he turned up to her direction, seeing her standing there for the first time. His eyes met hers. She tried to turn away from him but she lost the battle. His eyes were like magnet. There was so much chemistry in his gaze that she felt its kindling deep inside her. The love she still felt for him was undeniable. Her heart still belonged to him. But her head just couldn't trust him no more. She found herself fighting the urge to go running to him, hold him in her arms and tell him that she still loved him and she would never stop.

They stood like that, staring at each other, for what felt like forever before Sthandiwe snapped out of it and walked towards him. Not to him but to the exit he was standing next to. When she got closer to him she greeted, dryly.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris."

-Chris: "Thandi... Can we talk? Please."

-Sthandiwe: "Not now... Please excuse me."

She said pulling the door open and walked out. With her mixed feelings, she couldn't talk to him. She just had to get the hell out of there.

When outside, she turned to look back and she could see him through the glass door, still standing where he was, his hand on his head, roughly scratching his face. She knew that he was really hurting because that's what he would always do when he's hurting and avoiding to cry. But she couldn't stop or go back.

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She got to her car and sat behind the wheel. She didn't know what to do, she was just conflicted. Needing a friend to talk to, she found herself dialling Patrick's number. But it went straight to voicemail, which was nothing new, she hadn't been able to get hold of him or Alannah in a week. She didn't really mind when that happened over the week but now she minded. She really needed to talk to him, she needed him but he was out of reach. She threw her phone to the passenger seat defeated and found herself letting go, her tears just fell.

Just a little over a week ago she was in Eastern Cape, her family had accepted lobola from the Motaungs and she was happy, looking forward to being Chris' wife. She had not even the slightest doubt that she wanted to marry him, in fact she couldn't wait. But then this had to happen. She wished she didn't know about what he did, she wished she didn't look into it. That way she wouldn't

be having the doubts she was now having, she would still be happy and looking forward to starting a life with him. But now it was just difficult to look past everything and focus on the future.

She finally wiped her tears and drove home.

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It was around 18:30 when she got home. And as she pulled up in her driveway, Sean pulled up just behind her, coming from the opposite direction. She got out of the car just as he was also getting out of his. He got out already with a smile painted across his face, looking all kinds of cheerful, something Sthandiwe was not.

-Sean: "Hey, Princess."

She used to to love it when he called her that when they were still together. The way he'd say it would make her heart smile. And even this time was no different, she was down but she found herself letting out a smile even though it was brief.

-Sthandiwe: "Hey, Sean. What are you doing here?"

-Sean: "I was in the neighbourhood and I thought I should come by and see you."

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah, right."

She said humorously, obviously not buying that cliché line. Realising that he had just told the truth in the most cliché and unbelievable way made him laugh. But that laugh faded when he came closer to her.

-Sean: "Damn! You look like death warmed over. What's wrong?"

She didn't know whether it was because she'd been crying or the fact that the fatigue that had lately made her body its friend all day and everyday was also showing in her face. But if it was the former she wasn't willing to talk about it.

She walked around to the front of her car and sat on the bonnet. Sean followed her and came to sit beside her.

-Sthandiwe: "Well, you better get used to seeing me like this because I'm no longer as strong or healthy as I used to be. Liver problems. I'm always tired as fuck lately. This morning I couldn't even run a frigging kilometre without feeling like I was dying. Can you believe it?"

-Sean: "Liver problem? For real?"

-Sthandiwe: "Yeah. But I'm managing the condition, so it's cool."

-Sean: "That's better... Remember we used to run 6 kilometres in 30 minutes together?"

-Sthandiwe: "6 kilometres up the Glenvista steep slope. I remember, and I knew that you could do more but you were just accomodating me... I later cut it down to 4 kilometres because I didn't wanna wake up that early anymore."

-Sean: "But those were great times, weren't they? Us, together."

Sthandiwe kept quiet for a moment, reminiscing.

-Sthandiwe: "They were. Then you got deployed...and again. That's when shit happened."

-Sean: "Yah hey. And now you're engaged to be married to another man... Anyway, I haven't told you yet but I've left the military."

-Sthandiwe: "Really? You've left the Recess? [South African Special Forces]"

-Sean: "Yeah. I just want a change this year."

-Sthandiwe: "At age 33? But I thought serving your country was what you loved. Why did you leave?"

-Sean: "I've been in active duty for 10 years. That's enough serving. Now I want something different for myself. And maybe I'll get someone to settle down with, start a family, you know."

-Sthandiwe: "Mmh I see. But I hope the special talents you have on offer will not now be deployed in mercenary, 'dog of war' activities."

-Sean: "Of course not. You know me better than that."

-Sthandiwe: "That's good. Anyway, would you like to come inside?"

-Sean: "I thought you'd never ask."

He said smiling. Sthandiwe also let out a slight smile, and they got up and walked to the house. Even though they hadn't exactly been close friends after they broke up they weren't exactly estranged either, and she was actually glad he came by. He was a welcome distraction.

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They went to the kitchen and she offered him something to drink.

-Sean: "Don't you have anything to eat here?"

-Sthandiwe: "I don't know what you mean by that but here's the fridge and the grocery cupboard, knock yourself out... I also need to eat so I could take my meds but I don't have appetite and I don't know what to eat."

-Sean: "Still remember the place we frequented in Melville?"

She laughed. He had just taken her back to their crazy days.

-Sthandiwe: "It had plain sausages on the main course menu and we'd go there just to have them. Who goes to a restaurant almost everyday just to eat nothing but sausages? Dude, the things you made me do."

-Sean: "Hey, you loved those sausages too. And the place is still in business, we can go eat there. For old times sake."

-Sthandiwe: "Nah, can't do. I can't eat them sausages anymore. They are high in sodium and that's bad for me now."

-Sean: "Oh, yah. I didn't think about that."

-Sthandiwe: "The person who's been making sure that I eat and I eat what I should is..."

She stopped. She couldn't say Chris' name without being emotional. She looked up trying to fight back tears. And Sean could see that something was definitely wrong.

-Sean: "Hey, are you okay?"

She couldn't say anything, her tears just fell. Sean got off the high chair he was sitting on and went around the island unit to where she was standing.

-Sean: (taking her hands in his) "What's wrong?"

-Sthandiwe: "Nothing's wrong."

She said sniffing, feeling a little embarrassed now.

-Sean: "Don't forget that I know you, Tee. You can't lie to me, I know that you aren't okay. Talk to me...please."

He said that pulling her to his chest. That made her cry even harder. He wrapped his strong arms around her and let her cry on his chest. Knowing that she was wetting his shirt with all those tears made her feel uncomfortable but she couldn't pull back, that hug was exactly what she needed. It was soothing. And Sean being the strong manly man that he is, she felt safe in his arms, like everything was going to be okay. She even found herself not wanting to let go but she finally did, and wiped her tears.

-Sean: "Think you're ready to talk now?"

She nodded.

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He took her hand, walked her to one of the chairs and helped her sit down.

She really wanted to talk to someone. And even though talking to her ex wasn't exactly ideal she decided to do it because she didn't have a lot of options.

-Sthandiwe: "It's Chris."

-Sean: "What, he broke off the engagement?"

-Sthandiwe: "No, no. It's nothing like that. We're still engaged. And it's not even the question of our love for each other. I still love him, and I think he still loves me too. It's just that he did something that makes me doubt if I still want to have a life with him."

He kept quiet for a moment. Probably figuring out what to say.

-Sean: "How bad is it? What he did."

Maybe that was his way of asking what he did. But she couldn't exactly tell him that.

-Sthandiwe: "Bad enough, but he's apologetic about it. And I'm trying to let it go, I really am, but it's a battle. And the fact that I seem to be losing the battle is hurting me. I really love him, Sean, and I want to look past what he did but it's just hard. Fuck, I don't even know if I should."

-Sean: "I don't know what he did and I don't know what you're going through but I'll tell you this: they say love isn't everything, but I think that's where it all begins. You say you two still love each other, and if that's the case then you both can get past this obstacle, whatever it is. The fact that he's apologetic about whatever he did and that in your heart you want to forgive him means you still want to make your relationship work. And that's a good sign... Princess, no one's perfect. If you're looking for perfection you'll end up alone and resenting yourself. We all make mistakes, we all do things we're not proud of. Now the question is, are you willing to let this man go over this one bad thing that he did? I believe you agreed to marry him because you saw a lot of good in him. And if the good in him outweighs the bad then he's worthy of your forgiveness. I'm sure you do not wanna live with regrets. That's the worst feeling ever, trust me I know. I let you go and honestly, I'm still kicking myself for that."

Okay, she honestly didn't expect advice like that from him considering the fact that he was her ex. She was just talking for the sake of talking, just to get it out of her chest, but he surprised her.

And even though his last sentence made her feel somewhat uncomfortable, because he said every word with so much intensity in his voice, she chose not to focus on it but to everything else he'd said. What he said made sense. He said what she also knew and felt deep down her heart, even though her heart was conflicting with her head. Guess she just wanted to hear it from someone else.

Despite everything he did, Chris deserved her forgiveness. Yes, it wasn't going to be easy but she was willing to try harder. There are two kinds of people she hates the most in this world: liars and rapists. He'd lied to her face and she really hated that. He protected a rapist and she would still want an explanation for that. He had a friend murdered and that was the worst, but she was willing to move on from it. In her heart, forgiving him for that meant she was letting a friend down, and she wasn't feeling good about it. But the truth was, even if he could expose Chris for what he did it wouldn't bring Minenhle back. She would just be ruining Chris' life, the man that she loved. She just had to put herself first in this case, not others. What did she want? She wanted to be with Chris. So why couldn't she have that? The good in Chris outweighed the bad. And he had shown her in so many ways that he really loves her. He loved her with her dark side and all. Some guys would run for the hills once they get to know the things she'd done, but he didn't. Hell, he even killed for her. He did her dirty work for

her, he went and removed Alizwa on his own just so she wouldn't have to do it and find herself in trouble with the law. He protected her. He would never intentionally hurt her, would he? She was no longer thinking so.

She was willing to try and move on from everything that had happened because she really loved him. She was willing to bury the truth about what he did. But could she live with herself not knowing whether Palesa poisoned her or not? Or if Chris knew about it? She didn't think so.

-Sthandiwe: "Thanks for the talk, Sean. Really. What you just said got me thinking."

-Sean: "You're welcome."

He said getting off the chair and walking to the fridge.

-Sean: "Anyway, you said you need to take your meds so let's get you something to eat. Chris ain't here now to make sure that you eat so I'm gonna do it... Just a little snack would be enough because you have no appetite. How does some fruit salad sound?"

-Sthandiwe: "Sounds good. Thanks."

She said smiling.

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Back in Rosebank. After Sthandiwe left, Chris eventually forced himself to go up to Palesa's apartment to help Sihle even though he was no longer feeling like it. He just had to do it because his mother wanted it done.

But no matter how hard he forced himself he just couldn't do much, his heart was heavy and he couldn't concentrate. He asked Sihle to just leave everything and go home. And he also left to his car, well the VW TSI that once belonged to Palesa, because his was still in Cape Town. He pressed it to Sakhe's place.

Frustrated was an understatement, he was losing his mind. And he needed to talk to his friend.

He got to his apartment building and the security let him through because they knew him. He rushed up the stairs, got to his apartment and just pushed the door open without even knocking. He barged inside, startling Sakhe, who jumped up the couch he was laying on watching TV.

-Sakhe: "Dude, what the hell? What happened to knocking?"

-Chris: "Just calm down, bafo, and get me something to drink. Something strong."

He said as he came to stand by Sakhe's couch.

-Sakhe: "Something strong? Chris, you don't drink anymore. Remember? And there's a reason you don't."

-Chris: "Well, right now I feel like drinking."

He was now pacing back and forth, scratching his head.

-Sakhe: "What's up? Thandi still doesn't wanna hear you out?"

-Chris: "She doesn't. And I feel like I'm losing my mind, bro. I can't take it when she's not talking to me. It's killing me."

-Sakhe: "First, sit down you're gonna drive me crazy too. Second, you can't exactly blame Thandi. Sure she's still shocked by the whole thing. Just give her some time to process it all, she'll come around eventually."

He stopped pacing and looked at him.

-Chris: "That's just the thing, when will she come around if she can't even listen to what I have to say? And she's not even processing the entire story...Look, I know that I messed up big time. I know that I lied to her. I know that I did something bad, something she never thought I was even capable of doing. I know that she's disappointed in me right now and I'm sure I disgust her. But she needs to hear me out, at least... You know how much I love that woman, Sakhe. I've never loved anyone the way I love her. She's my life, my everything. Which is why this is killing me. I need her to understand that I was in an impossible situation that's why I did everything I did. I need her to understand that."

-Sakhe: "But I still think telling her the real reason why you protected that rapist son-of-a-bitch would be a big mistake, bro. You see how she is now, so how do you think she'll react once she hears the whole truth?"

-Chris: "I'm gonna tell her, Sakhe, I'm not changing my mind. I'm done lying and keeping things from her. And I think once she hears the truth she'll understand why I did what I did... That's the only Mrs Me, bafo, and I can't keep secrets from her. They have a way of coming out anyway. So it's better if she hears this from me."

-Sakhe: "Okay then. Good luck with telling her."

He said carelessly as he reclined back on the couch.

-Chris: "Will go see her in the morning. Right now, please fix me that drink. This whole thing is just stressing me out."

-Sakhe: "I don't see myself stressing over a woman, ever. And I'll tell you this, I won't let you drink because of this. You just need to calm down. Sit your behind down on that chair and watch the game with me."

-Chris: "You don't understand what I'm going through because you've never loved anyone in your life. Thandi is everything I ever wanted in a woman, in a wife. Until you get a woman like that you won't understand."

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In Auckland Park. After eating, Sean didn't want to leave Sthandiwe alone, saying he'd drive home once he sees that she's feeling better. Whatever that meant. Sthandiwe didn't want to be alone anyway so he let him stay. And for some reason she couldn't even explain she loved having him around. Or maybe it was simply because she was feeling lonely.

She went upstairs to freshen up then joined him in front of the TV for a movie.

They must have fallen asleep while watching the movie because Sean only got woken up by the doorbell in the morning. Shit! He'd really slept here? He was actually cuddling with Sthandiwe on her L-shaped leather couch. And he remembered pulling her closer to him the previous night, but he was sleepy, not fully conscious or aware of what he was doing. He looked at her and she was sleeping peacefully, not even hearing the doorbell. It wasn't planned, but waking up next to her felt good. He couldn't help but remember the days he would wake up next to her like this, and those were the best days of his life.

Not wanting to wake her up, he slowly pulled away from her and went to open the door. He was barefooted, his hair ruffled, and only the two bottom buttons of his shirt were buttoned, exposing his bare chest.

He opened the door yawning, opening it to Chris. Chris hadn't been able to sleep much the previous night and all he wanted was to talk to Sthandiwe. So in the morning he woke up early to go see her. Only to be met by this half-naked guy in her house. He didn't know who he was because they had never met before, they'd only known of each other. The first emotion he felt was hurt but it quickly gave way to anger. The picture he was seeing in front of him wasn't pretty.

-Sean: "Hello. Can I help you?"

That only made Chris even more angry. He felt his blood boil and rage filling every cell of his body. Where does this guy get the nerve to ask him that bullshit in his own fiancée's house? And how dare Sthandiwe disrespect him like that? He had paid lobola for her for goodness sake. How dare she do this? Yes, they were facing some problems but that didn't give her a right to sleep with other men. All that was going through his head.

He violently pushed Sean aside and walked inside. Sean staggered backwards but quickly gained his balance before he could fall. Chris was already inside screaming Sthandiwe's name. Sthandiwe jumped up from the couch she was sleeping on somewhat confused.

-Sthandiwe: "Chris?! What's with the noise this early?"

He looked at her from head to toe. She was wearing very skimpy summer PJ shorts and vest.

Seeing his look and Sean coming from behind him, she realised just how this picture looked. But she didn't know how she'd explain it. She raked her fingers through her classic short pixie haircut, nervously. Even those fingers weren't quite steady. She could see the anger in Chris' eyes and it terrified her. She'd never seen him that angry, not even once.

He came closer to her. But scared of him, she stepped back with each step he took until she reached the wall next to the TV. With her back against the wall she had nowhere to go. Chris came to stand in front of her and he could smell Sean's cologne on her.

-Chris: "Sthandiwe, you open your legs for other men now?"

He roared causing Sthandiwe to jump, scared. The way his eyes were burning with anger, she swore he'd jump and squeeze the life out of her.