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Unplanned - Sino's Story by Sandisiwe

Gxaba

Chapter 1

10 YEARS AGO

In the dim-lit corridors of the university, a Friday afternoon pulsates with the urgency of time slipping away. The clock, an unrelenting reminder, sneers at my tardiness. With the seconds ticking away, I navigate the labyrinthine halls, my heart pounding in tandem with the rhythm of my hurried footsteps.

The weight of my backpack pulls at my shoulders, a tangible manifestation of my academic burdens. Amidst the frenzy, regrets dance in my mind, a waltz of what-ifs and if-onlys. A fleeting thought grazes my consciousness—mom, that elusive savior with the power to banish the chaos if only she had gifted me a chariot on wheels.

As I sprint, a collision interrupts my frenzied dash. It's not an obstacle but a human embodiment of solidity, a wall that I had not registered on my mental map. A fragrance, tantalizing and captivating, wafts from the unexpected blockade. "I don't remember there being a wall here," I muse, momentarily captivated by its aroma. Time, however, refuses to bow to my distractions.

"F***!" I exclaim, my books scattered like fallen soldiers. In the brief chaos, a voice, deep and resonant, punctures the air. "I'm so sorry, Miss Mbana," he utters, his lips molding my surname into a symphony of indulgence. The syllables roll off his tongue like melted chocolate, an unexpected pleasure in my rush.

'SNAP OUT OF IT,' my inner voice commands, rudely awakening me from the transient reverie. I reclaim my books, and as our hands brush, an electric charge courses through me. "Thank you," I murmur, breaking free from the magnetic pull.

As I resume my sprint, the echo of my lecturer's dramatic reproach fills the air. "Sinokuhle Mbana, always late!" His theatricality mirrors the grandiosity of the university campus. Apologies offered, I reclaim my seat, saved by a friend named Layla.

"Sir, I'm sorry," I utter, my voice a hushed plea. His admonishment, a reminder of my perpetual tardiness, follows me to my seat. "You're ten minutes late. I should have locked

the door already! This is your last warning," he scolds, a stern echo in the cavernous lecture hall. UWC, a vast expanse where time waits for no one, especially not for Sinokuhle Mbana.

In the hushed aftermath of the lecture, Layla, my steadfast confidante, greets me with a whisper, "hey friend, what have I missed?" Her eyes, pools of understanding, reflect the shared struggles of our academic journey.

"Nothing babe, he gave us these," she replies, offering a booklet of slides. I accept it with gratitude, tracing my fingers over the printed pages. "Thank you, babe," I murmur, opening the booklet to the page where she is.

As the monotony of the lecture resumes, Mr. Tight Pants, our enigmatic lecturer, singles me out from behind his glasses.

"What's wrong with this code? Nothing's been underlined, but it gives out the wrong output. Miss Mbana," he queries, his tone laced with a subtle challenge. There's a lingering suspicion that he holds a personal vendetta against me.

"Logical error, maybe?" I respond, a veil of confidence masking my uncertainty. His gaze lingers on me, a silent appraisal, before he concedes, "Right, a logical error is an error that occurs when the program produces incorrect output, which means that we probably did code the calculation correctly."

The lecture meanders on, weaving through the complexities of computer science. The revelation of an impending class test dampens the atmosphere, a looming cloud casting a shadow over the supposed joy of university life. Whoever claimed university was fun clearly hadn't ventured into the intricate realms of Computer Sciences.

I harbor a love-hate relationship with my chosen path. It's not my passion, but the weight of familial expectations—the legacy of Ayola Majola and Lwando Mbana—anchors me to a course I don't entirely embrace. To alleviate the monotony, I've enrolled in part-time fashion design, a secret endeavor supported by my mother, who understands the struggles of forging a path without the cushion of parental endorsement.

The lecture hall empties, leaving me alone with Layla, who eyes me with an amused smile. "So, how was your test?" she inquires, her tone a blend of curiosity and skepticism.

"It was easy; I'm certain I passed," I declare with pride. Despite the chaos of running late, the love for what I'm studying propels me forward, a beacon in the tumultuous sea of academia.

As I gather my belongings into my handbag, I share a curious incident with Layla

my trusted confidante. "I bumped into some guy today, but I didn't even get the chance to see his face," I confess, my tone tinged with a hint of mystery.

She responds with a teasing tone, "Then how do you even know it was a guy?" Her sarcasm dances in the air, and I can't help but play along.

"I'm certain it was a guy; his voice was heavenly, and he had nice hands. He smelt heavenly and manly," I reveal, a dreamy expression painting my face as the memory of the encounter lingers.

"Ladies," a masculine voice interrupts, sending ripples of curiosity through the room. A group of male figures enters our class, and laughter accompanies their entrance until it halts at the sight of us.

"Miss Mbaná, we meet again," declares a tall, light-skinned, brown-eyed creature. My heart skips a beat, and I find myself momentarily breathless. My God, he is hot! A sense of recognition flickers in his eyes as he looks at me. Could he be the guy I bumped into earlier? His broad shoulders and rock-solid chest seem eerily familiar, and the heavenly scent that envelops him confirms my suspicion. What are the chances? The air thickens with anticipation as our eyes lock, and the universe seems to pause, allowing the unspoken connection to unfold.

The air between us crackles with uncertainty as I muster a simple "Hi." My subconscious, the relentless critic, scolds me for my lack of eloquence. 'Is that all you can say?' it taunts. 'I don't know his name, okay?!' I retort, my inner dialogue becoming a battleground. 'Play it cool,' she advises, and I decide to heed her counsel.

"I'm Bantubonke Mtwá," he introduces himself, his hand extended toward me. I take a moment, feeling the weight of the situation, and then reciprocate, "Sinokuhle Mbana." The exchange is brief, a handshake that lingers in the air for a fleeting moment before I swiftly withdraw my hand.

Beside me, Layla, my ever-confident friend, makes her presence known. "Hi," she greets, her tone surprisingly cold. Trust Layla to exude an air of nonchalance that keeps guys on their toes. Unfazed, she waves, a subtle acknowledgment that belies her disinterest.

"We have to go, mom's waiting outside," Layla announces, her grip firm on my arm as she pulls me away. The abrupt departure is a tactical move, an escape from the awkward dance of introductions. I glance back, catching a glimpse of Bantubonke's bemused expression as we make our exit, leaving an air of mystery in our wake.

As we make our way to the door, his voice cuts through the air, lingering with a question that hovers between us like an

unspoken promise. "Will I ever see you again?" he shouts, the words trailing behind us like a fleeting echo.

"U'Dubs is a big campus," Layla dismissively remarks, pulling me outside into the sunlight. Once beyond the threshold, she fans herself dramatically, a theatrical response to the encounter.

"It has to be illegal to look that yummy together with your squad! Did you see the lesbian with a fade, though?" Layla adds, her observations flowing freely. I shoot her a questioning look.

"Since when are you into girls?" I inquire, raising an eyebrow, and she chuckles, her laughter a carefree melody.

"I'm not into her; I only said she's hot! I would give up dick for a few days for her," Layla says casually, leaving me amused and slightly bewildered. Is she joking or serious? Her nonchalant attitude prompts laughter, a shared moment of lighthearted banter amidst the uncertainty of the encounter.

We continue our stroll, heading toward the cafeteria, the air filled with casual conversations. Layla, ever the instigator, manages to convince me to embark on a little Instagram stalking mission. Intrigued, I pull up Bantubonke's profile only to find it's set to private.

"Request a follow," Layla suggests, her eyes gleaming with mischief, adding another layer to the unfolding saga of the

mysterious encounter. The decision hangs in the air, a subtle invitation to step into the unknown and explore the possibilities that await beyond the digital divide.

Layla playfully pokes me, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "NO! I don't want to give him the satisfaction!" I protest, vehemently opposing the idea of initiating contact.

"Then make your account private so that he won't be able to stalk you," she suggests, seizing my phone before I can mount any further resistance.

"WOW, Lay!" I exclaim, my defenses crumbling as she takes control, leaving me defeated and munching on fries to drown my surrender. "Let's wait and see," she declares, handing back my phone, a victorious grin on her face. I shake my head, contemplating the insanity of the person I proudly call my friend.

As we sit in the cafeteria, the air thick with the scent of fries and the sound of casual chatter, my phone suddenly beeps. An Instagram notification illuminates the screen, and there it is: @Bonke_Mtwa has requested to follow me! The universe, it seems, is conspiring to weave the threads of connection in unexpected ways, and I can't help but feel a surge of anticipation for what might unfold next.

2

“Confirm,” commands my spirited friend, Layla, seizing the phone from my grasp. Oh, Layla, always in a rush!

“There, he’s accepted you already,” she declares, returning my phone with an infectious excitement. “I’ll get to stalk my woman crush from you. What’s her handle?” she asks, fingers dancing over her own device.

My subconscious echoes, ‘What have I gotten myself into?’

“Fine, let’s check her out,” I concede, delving into Bantu’s pictures. Good heavens, the man is undeniably FINE! As I scroll, my father’s call interrupts my virtual exploration.

“Hey, Daddy,” I answer, navigating the delicate balance of familial dynamics.

“Oku, hey, I’m outside,” he announces, treating me like a child lost in the vastness of Cape Town.

“We’re coming, Daddy,” I reply, grabbing my bag, and Layla does the same.

“Ok, princess,” he affirms before ending the call. Layla, never one to mince words, questions, “Your dad’s outside?” I nod.

“Great!” she exclaims, slightly annoyed. We walk to the main gate, engaging in light conversation until we reach Dad’s car. Today, he’s flaunting a Porsche, an exhibition of his penchant

for ostentation. Sometimes, I'm convinced he's in the throes of a midlife crisis, and Mom might be too. He stands outside, shades on, a fresh haircut accentuating his allure. He looks all kinds of HOT, a fact not lost on Layla, who even suggests he could be mistaken for my blesser.

"Hey, princess, Layla," he greets us, and Layla reciprocates with a casual "Hey, Mr. Mbana."

"Dad, did you have to?" I roll my eyes, slipping into the front seat while Layla settles in the back.

"Did I have to what, princess?" he feigns innocence.

"Let's just go before people assume you're my blesser," I jest, fastening my seatbelt.

"I think he looks pretty hot," Layla remarks, earning a sharp look from me.

"See? Layla gets it, and so will your mom," he defends, a playful banter ensuing. I laugh, knowing my mother well enough to predict her reaction.

"Yeah, right, Dad. We both know Mom will take a pair of scissors and chop that fade off. Ouchea looking like a blesser," I tease, prompting him to crank up the volume in jest.

"Mall or straight home?" he inquires, turning to Layla.

“Straight home,” she decides. Layla and I are neighbors, after all.

“Okay, then,” Dad acquiesces, driving us home in our Porsche.

In our yard, I witness the smart features of our house, a testament to my father’s bouts of boredom. Inside, I greet Nono, our housekeeper, before settling on the couch beside my little sister, Sanele.

“Hey, Saney,” I greet, laying my head on her tiny thighs.

“Hi, Oku, get off of me; you’re heavy!” she protests, pushing my head away. I chuckle.

“You’re so cute. How are you? How was school?” I inquire, sitting up.

“School was boring. How was your school?” she asks

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focused on the TV. Classic Saney, always engrossed in her favorite show.

“It was okay. What do you want for dinner?” I ask, and she turns to me, her appetite evident.

“You mean we’re eating out?” she queries, excited. I nod.

“I want Pana,” she declares, and I roll my eyes. What else was I expecting? Pana for her and Spur for Thando.

“We’ll see what Dad thinks first,” I reply.

“What about Mom?” she asks, concern etched on her face.

“Mom is going to be late,” I inform her, emphasizing the reality of our mother’s demanding career.

“Mom is going to kill you,” she predicts, a hint of a smile playing on her lips.

“Yeah, she would,” I agree, laughing. As we drop Layla off and head home, Dad’s car rings with the familiar voice of Mom.

“Hey, Kitten, I’ve got your daughter and her friend in the car,” Dad informs her, and Layla and I greet in unison.

“Hey, baby. Hey, guys. Honey, where are you now?” Mom inquires.

“I just pulled up in our street. What’s up?” Dad responds.

“I wanted you to pass by and place an order for pizza or something. I won’t make it for dinner; I have a deadline,” Mom explains, and I observe Dad’s face shift from sweet to sour.

“Okay, honey,” he concedes, sounding disappointed.

“We’ll talk later, okay, babe? I love you. Bye, girls,” Mom bids farewell, and we respond in unison before the call ends.

“So, what do you guys want to eat?” Dad asks, turning to me. I shrug; after all, I’m not his only child.

“Let’s decide when we get home and see what the others want to eat,” I suggest. After dropping Layla off, we drive into our smart home, Dad’s passion project from gate to house.

In my room, I put my bag in its place and grab my phone. Heading toward Dad’s room, I accidentally overhear a tense conversation.

“How long has this been going on?” Dad’s voice rises in anger. “You mean to tell me that it’s been a week, and you’re only telling me this now?” He paces around, his frustration palpable. “Find this person and take them to the warehouse!” he orders before hanging up.

I quickly tiptoe back toward his room, pretending I heard nothing and just exited my room.

“Princess,” he greets, and I smile.

“Hey, Daddy. So I was thinking Mugg and Bean because Saney wants Panarottis and Thando will obviously want Spur,” I suggest. He looks at me thoughtfully.

“Whichever is fine, princess. Please go fetch your brother at 4; there’s somewhere I have to be,” he requests, heading past me.

“Okay, Dad,” I reply, making my way toward the stairs to the kitchen. I need something to eat while I clandestinely observe my newfound crush. As I settle on the couch, a call from Mom interrupts my musings.

“Hey, Mom,” I answer.

“Hey, baby, what are you doing?” she inquires.

“I’m about to eat. Dad seems a little pissed about something,” I confess, already aware that’s likely why she called. She sighs.

“Your father is dramatic. Wherever you guys eat, please order me something. My boss is flying in later, and he wants a report as in yesterday,” she says, sounding frustrated.

“Sorry, Mom. You’ll be fine,” I assure her.

“Yeah, I will. Where’s your father?” she asks, and I debate whether to lie or be honest. Ultimately, honesty prevails.

“He went out a few minutes ago. I don’t know where he went, but he was talking to someone on the phone and sounded really pissed. Said something about

someone being brought to the warehouse,” I spill.

“Okay, baby. Thanks, hey. I’ll see you later. Do you have classes later today?” she asks.

“Not today, Mom. Tomorrow at 5,” I respond.

“Okay, baby. Let me get back to work. Greet your sister for me and your brother. Actually, let me talk to Saney before she throws a fit,” she laughs, and I hand the phone to Saney, who’s been eyeing me since she realized I was talking to Mom.

3

"Nigga, I'm outside the first gate," I text Thando, agitated by his tardiness. The bell rang 15 minutes ago, and there's no sign of him.

"Coming," a text promptly arrives, and I wait, multitasking by texting Buntu about my current situation. Yes, Buntu slid into my DMs, and our conversations have been going quite well. Maybe I'd even consider dating him; we'd undoubtedly make a stunning couple. The door startles me open.

"Hey, Sino," says my little brother, settling in the front seat.

"Hi. Where the hell have you been?" I ask, starting the car.

"I was in the yard. I thought you'd text like Mom and Dad normally do," he defends himself. I turn to him.

"Yeah, well, I always find you waiting outside," I remark.

"Because you're never this early. Everything okay at home?" he probes, his gaze penetrating through me. I chuckle.

"Why would anything be wrong at home?" I ask, focusing on the road. He chuckles too.

"Because you're early. You're never early," he points out.

"Mom's not going to make it for dinner, so we're eating out," I inform him, and he sighs.

"And that means we're going to your choice of restaurant," he says, sounding annoyed. I laugh.

"Yep! You know how it is," I reply, increasing the volume. I'm driving Mom's Jeep, which she graciously allowed me to use. The joys!

"I'll tell Mom you drove the Jeep," he threatens, and I just laugh.

"Nice try, buddy. She knows!" I retort, sticking my tongue out. His school is a 30-minute drive from our house, more depending on the traffic, and right now, there's traffic. Great! My phone rings, and it's Mom.

"Honey," she says.

"Hey, Mom," I respond.

"Hey, Honey," my little brother chimes in. That's what he calls Mom, and he's been calling her that for as long as I can remember.

"Great! How are you, baby?" Mom asks. I automatically assume she's talking to my little brother because he and I spoke earlier.

"I'm good, Mom. Thanks. We're on our way home, and your daughter was actually earlier than usual. Should I be worried?" I shoot my brother a look.

"I will drive into this truck!" I threaten, and he laughs.

"Not in my car, please! Plus, not with my baby," Mom insists, making me laugh. She can be so dramatic at times. They both know I would never do such a thing.

"I'm kidding, geez. Tell your son to watch it," I warn, and Mom laughs.

"Baby, wear a seatbelt in case your sister tries something," she advises.

"I gasp. "Mom!" She laughs.

"I'm just saying. Get home safe, okay? Seemingly, I'll be out of here earlier than expected," she says.

"I'm sure Dad must be happy to know that," I mock, laughing at her.

"Shut up, Sino! You must think you and I are the same age, I swear! I am 20 years older than you, little girl," she says dramatically

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making my little brother and me laugh.

"We love you too, Mom. Bye now," I say.

"Bye, babies," she says before dropping the call, and all is well in love and war. We chill in silence with him pressing his phone while I listen to my music connected to the radio and cars

honking behind us and in front of us. Traffic is hectic around this time of the day because everyone is either leaving work or school and rushing to get home.

"Sino," my brother calls, bringing me back to reality. I've been lost in thoughts while listening to Jhene Aiko's album. I love her music; I'm a fan, and her voice is just calming.

"What?" I ask, annoyed.

"Geez, what's wrong with you?" he says, rolling his eyes.

"I'm sorry for snapping. What's up, little bro?" I ask politely this time around.

"So, there's this girl," he begins, and I smile, turning to him. He immediately rolls his eyes.

"Keep talking," I encourage.

"Anyway, she's pretty, and she's pretty much everything, but I'm scared to approach her. There's something about her that's just intimidating, sis. We do talk on social media, but I can't gather up the balls to approach her like that, and I really like her," he confesses, making me laugh. I never thought he and I would have such a conversation considering how close he and Mom are.

"At least you're already talking on social media. Walk up to her and greet, start small. Talk about school and just take it from

there. Nowadays, girls just want a guy who's honest from the get-go. Are you still a virgin?" I ask, side-eyeing him. He chuckles and looks outside.

"I'm not answering that question, Sino," he says with his deep voice that sounds like Dad's. Argh my little brother is a photocopy of my father in all ways, the only thing he took from mom is the eyes otherwise the rest is all dad.

"So, you've already had sex?" I tease, poking my little brother playfully.

"That is none of your business!" he retorts, and I can't help but let a surprised expression flicker across my face. Yet, deep down, I'm not entirely shocked because, well, my little brother is quite the catch – your classic dark-skinned guy with practically everything a girl could desire. I just hope he's not turning into a heartbreaker.

"So, spill the details. When? Where? With whom? And do you guys still talk?" I fire off questions, my eyes alternating between the road and his reactions.

"Because you're not going to let this go, are you? This is about her, remember when I went to a sleepover? Or rather, when I said I was at a sleepover?" he sighs.

I nod, trying to recall, and then it hits me. Last month, my little bro claimed to be at a friend's place for a sleepover and returned acting all mysterious.

"When you were acting all weird and stuff?" I ask, a sly grin forming.

"I wasn't acting weird! Anyway, yeah, that's when it happened. I'm not going into detail!" he declares sternly, but I can't resist a laugh.

"And what about the girl whose virginity you broke?" I inquire, steering into the driveway. He nonchalantly shrugs.

"She and I are cool. She's seeing someone," he says dismissively.

"Are you sure?" I press, and he nods, opening his door as soon as I finish parking. Okay, he's definitely being weird. I let it go, grab my things, and lock the car, following him inside the house. Meanwhile, I respond to Bantu's DMs, sharing my number. Not even two minutes later, my phone rings with an unknown number flashing on the screen.

"Hello," I answer tentatively.

"Hey, beautiful, you're speaking to Bantu Mtwá"

I stroll past the kitchen, and there's a change in the air. Dad stands there, adorned in a different attire, sipping bottled water with a certain tension apparent in the way he taps furiously on his phone. I nonchalantly brush past, my focus more captivated by the newfound object of my affection. Engaging in conversation with my crush, I make my way into my room, where I surrender to the plush comfort of my bed, reclining on my back with an overflow of giggles and a perpetual smile.

He, the source of my elation, proves to be a captivating soul, effortlessly coaxing blushes from me with his charming banter. It seems, perhaps, a budding romance is on the horizon. As the details unfold, I discover he's navigating the final year of his Computer Science journey, the sole offspring in his household. Surprisingly, he shares a familial connection with the intriguing lesbian my friend has eyes for—they're cousins. Originating from the Eastern Cape, he defies the stereotype of a privileged rich kid, embracing a refreshing humility that, while endearing, manages to be a tad vexing. Yet, in my heart, I'm an absolute sucker for such genuine souls. The contrast between expectation and reality leaves me pleasantly shaken, and I can't help but find his unassuming nature irresistibly cute.

He finally poses the question, his words hanging in the air like a delicate dance. I exhale, preparing to unravel the layers of my story.

"Well... Being Lwando and Ayola's daughter, one is expected to wield a formidable degree, especially when your father is a computer wizard. It boiled down to pursuing two majors or succumbing to my father's desires," I respond, my voice carrying the weight of familial expectations.

"I'm confused," he interjects, seeking clarity, "why would your father choose a course for you? What are you passionate about?"

A soft chuckle escapes my lips, a gentle prelude to the revelation that follows. "I love clothes and the art of creating them, yet I'm equally enamored with the world of computers. After passing matric, I found myself accepted for clothing management at CPUT and DUT, as well as for Computer Science and Fashion here. Faced with a decisive choice, I opted for fashion, much to my mother's approval. However, my father, being the stern figure he is, flatly rejected the notion. According to him, no daughter of his would tread the path of fashion, deeming it a dying field unworthy of his investment."

"Ouch," he remarks sympathetically, injecting a note of empathy into the conversation.

"Yeah, that's an understatement," I reply. "Mom, though, worked her persuasive magic, convincing him to let me pursue my passion. He reluctantly agreed but insisted he'd only finance Computer Science. I either had to choose another 'serious' course or face a year of idle contemplation at home. Long story short, with mom's interventions and a fortunate bursary, I managed to convince the dean that I could juggle both fields without compromising excellence."

"Damn! You have rich people problems," he exclaims, punctuating his statement with laughter that resonates deeply and infectiously.

"You could say that. Being born into my family is both a blessing and a curse," I confess, my words laden with a complexity only those in similar shoes would understand.

"But you're happy, right?" he probes, his eyes searching mine for the truth.

I pause for a moment, allowing the question to percolate through my thoughts. Am I genuinely happy? In the intricate tapestry of my family dynamics, I find joy, yet complexities lurk beneath the surface.

"Yeah, I'm happy," I declare with a smile, though a fleeting moment of contemplation betrays the certainty in my voice.

"You had to think about it first... says a lot if you ask me," he observes astutely, a hint of curiosity tinging his words.

"Why?" I inquire

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a perplexed expression etched across my face, seeking to unravel the layers of his observation.

"Because I believe that if you're genuinely happy, it's never something to second guess," he asserts, his words wrapping around me like a comforting embrace.

"Sino, Dad says let's get going," announces my little sister, a sudden interruption to our conversation. I nod in acknowledgment.

"Be there in a moment," I reply, sitting up and reluctantly preparing to end the call with Bantu. As I express my imminent departure, he sighs audibly, a palpable lament echoing through the phone.

"I'll miss you," he confesses, and a mental image of him sulking plays in my mind. I can't help but chuckle at the thought of his adorable pout.

"Don't sulk. I'll be back later, and I'll tell you all about my dinner with the family," I assure him, slipping on my shoes as I sit on the edge of my bed.

"You guys have dinner at 6?" he questions, seemingly surprised.

"No, silly! We're going out to eat as a family. Dinner is usually at 7 or 7:30 pm," I clarify.

"Bye, Bantubonke," I say, walking out of my room adorned in a flowing kimono.

"Bye, Sinokuhle omhle Majola-Mbana," he replies, and a blush tinges my cheeks. Ending the call abruptly, I sense that we could talk endlessly. The excitement he stirs in me is a novel sensation—one I'm not accustomed to. Ah, the sweet taste of growth!

"You're dating now," my little brother declares, startling me as he emerges from his room.

"Don't do that!" I playfully shove him, but his wide-eyed expression betrays the intrigue behind his innocent gaze.

"Wait! You really are dating," he exclaims, mouth agape, and I roll my eyes in response.

"Wow!" I retort, annoyed, and make my way toward the stairs.

"Come on, spill. Who is he?" he presses, and I shut him down with a dismissive gesture.

"Shut up!" I command, gritting my teeth with a fake smile. We descend the stairs in silence, and I plug in my music, setting the tone for the car ride.

"So, how was school?" Dad inquires, glancing at my brother through the rearview mirror.

"There's a girl he likes and is afraid to tell," I reveal, not sparing a glance for the likely evil eye my little brother is shooting my way. He had it coming for his comments earlier.

"You like a girl," Dad notes, and my brother quickly denies, "Sino doesn't know what she's talking about, Dad!"

"I saw him walking with her as he was leaving school, and it did not look like a friend to me," I interject, enjoying the discomfort I'm causing my brother.

"Shut up, Sino! She's lying, Dad," he protests.

I ponder why he doesn't confide in Dad about such matters. After all, our parents' relationship could offer valuable insights. But then again, Dad seems to discourage my relationships, scaring off every potential suitor. My prom date was even a family friend's son! In essence, I've never had a real relationship, thanks to my father's overbearing nature.

"It's okay to date, son. You need to experience some things, and that includes getting to know women," Dad proudly declares, earning a pointed look from me.

"Wait, so it's okay for my 14-year-old brother to date, but not your 17-year-old daughter?" I question, highlighting the double standard at play.

He chuckles, his gaze fixed ahead, seemingly unbothered by the playful banter. My father, an enigma in his own right, appears impervious to my attempts at teasing.

"Yes," he affirms, unfazed. Truly, my father is a character, and I can't help but shake my head at his nonchalant response.

"You're taking on two courses, Sino. Can't afford any distractions," he remarks, adopting a more serious tone. Well, there goes my attempt to put my little brother on the spot—I end up being the one getting roasted. My subconscious throws a sarcastic comment my way, wishing for the presence of Mrs. Mbaná, our mother, in these moments.

"Ayt, parent," I reply, using the term that, while not exactly annoying him, doesn't sit well with him. He shoots me a look, warning me not to start with him.

"Don't start with me, Sinokuhle," he warns sternly, eliciting laughter from all of us. Our father, dramatic as ever.

"Fine, parent, I won't," I say with pride, reveling in my ability to irk him ever so slightly.

"We're eating at Pana, text your mother," he declares, almost spiting me. We arrive at Pana, and as we park, we all disembark, engaging in light conversations. I cling onto his arm, partly because I can, and partly because, with his current look,

he attracts unwanted attention from admirers. Dad, loyal to Mom, doesn't glance in another woman's direction openly. Even if he does, it's discreet. I've never witnessed a man who loves his wife as deeply as my father loves Mom.

As expected, the girls at the entrance can't help but cast admiring glances his way as we approach. I make a playful comment, hooking my arm through his.

"This is why I hook my arm to yours. These girls always want a piece of you, and I have to protect Mom's snack," I quip, hoping he overlooks the lighthearted tease. He chuckles and counters my comment.

"Sino, I am still your father, and I'm not a snack. I'm a full meal, and your mom can testify to that," he says proudly, prompting laughter from me.

WOW, guys!

"Table for 4, sir?" asks a pretty hostess standing by the door with menus.

"5, please," I assert proudly, and she leads the way after handing us menus.

"You are so dramatic. You really are your mother's daughter," Dad remarks, nudging me.

"You said it yourself, you're mom's full meal," I reply with a shrug, laughter bubbling up. We settle into our chairs, perusing the menus. Dad orders for himself, and the kids make their selections. I'm not a fan of Pana, so I carefully examine my menu.

"Please come back after like 5 minutes. I'll have a bubblegum milkshake," I tell the server, who nods and takes note of my order.

"Please make that two. My wife is on her way," Dad adds, and the server confirms everyone's order.

Mom arrives just as the server leaves. She settles next to her husband, planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Hello, kids," she finally greets, and we respond in unison, making her giggle.

"How are you guys?" she asks, initiating a conversation that promises to be filled with familial warmth and shared laughter.

"Dad says, 'Your meeting ended quite early,'" he remarks, his tone laced with a hint of curiosity.

"Yeah, it did. Lucky me," Mom replies, her sarcasm adding a playful undertone to the conversation.

"We're good, Mom. Thank you. And how are you?" I inquire, shifting the focus to her.

"It was okay, baby. My job is draining, yoh," she says, rolling her head back and untying her beautiful, long hair. My mother is the epitome of perfection. If you thought perfection didn't exist, you haven't met Mrs. Mbana. From the way she wears her hair to the way she ties her 6-inch Louboutins, she exudes elegance. She's an hourglass, radiating Londie London vibes if you catch my drift. Her beauty is unparalleled, and her body seems untouched by the fact that she's a mother of three.

"That's what you get for being superwoman! Let's have a spa date this Saturday," I suggest, and she smiles in agreement.

"On you, right?" she asks, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

"On your husband's black card," I reply with a smirk, and Dad rolls his eyes at my audacity.

"I'm also coming

right?" Saney jumps in, and I roll my eyes.

"It's just me and Mom," I assert.

"You either include my baby, or you pay with your own card," Dad interjects, adding an unexpected twist to the plan.

"Fine then," I concede, rolling my eyes at the turn of events.

"So I can come, right?" Saney asks, flashing that innocent smile of hers, a smile that works like magic on everyone in the house.

Saney is a master manipulator with her perfect little grin and puppy eyes.

"So, what did you order for me?" Mom breaks into the conversation, diverting attention back to the present.

"Pasta. They don't have anything interesting on their menu," I say with a shrug.

"Thanks, baby. So, honey, how was your day? What did you do all day?" Mom turns to Dad, seizing the opportunity for a one-on-one conversation. I take this moment to respond to messages on my phone.

Amidst the casual family banter, I receive a series of messages from Layla, my ever-curious friend, inquiring about Bantu and dropping some unexpected revelations about her own romantic adventures.

Her: "you don't waste time huh?"

Me: (laughing emojis) "you know me, friend. There's something exciting about her, you know? I think I might just be into girls."

Her: (3 laughing emojis) "yeah right, soon as you get tired of her you're going back to dick."

Her: "you know me all too well, friend. I'm strictly dickly, but I like to keep my options open, you know?" (smirk emoji)

Me: (rolling eyes emojis) "Whatever. Enjoy this game while you can, babe."

Her: "What's up with you and Mr. Yummy—probably packed down there (eggplant)?"

I burst out laughing, drawing raised eyebrows from my siblings.

"Go back to whatever you guys were talking about," I dismiss them, fixating my eyes back on my screen, and respond to Layla.

Me: (5 rolling on the floor emojis) "WOW! Dude really?"

Her: (raised eyebrow emoji) "yes really. So details."

Me: (zipped mouth emoji) "there's nothing to tell. Love you, gotta go now! (3 side kisses emojis)"

I log out of WhatsApp and lock my phone. Layla is nosy. My milkshake arrives, and I dig in, not particularly hungry but loving the taste.

"Mom's coming to Cape Town next week," Mom announces, and my siblings erupt in joy. We adore Grandma Amanda—she's awesome in every sense.

"What about Grandpa?" I ask, seeking more information.

"I don't know; Mom didn't mention anything about him," Mom says, uncertainty edging her voice.

"Honey, did Dad mention anything about coming to Cape Town to you?" she directs the question at Dad. He shakes his head.

"Nope, we last spoke a few days back, and it was all business," he says, seemingly focused on his drink. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's hiding something.

Our food arrives, and we all indulge in the feast. Dad settles the bill, and I drive with Mom, while the rest follow in Dad's car.

"So today, I bumped into a guy," I say, breaking the silence as we drive out of Pana, Dad following behind Mom's car.

"Is that so? What does he look like? Is he cute? Does this mean you'll finally start dating?" Mom's excitement is palpable, and I can't help but laugh. My parents, though opposites, complement each other perfectly.

"Wow, Mom! Really now?" I say, rolling my eyes while flipping through my phone and opening my Instagram app.

"What? I want to know. I mean, baby, you're in Varsity, and you're still a virgin who has never had her first real kiss," she teases, adding a playful jab at my romantic life.

"Shade caught, Mom," I poke her, and she laughs.

"He's cute. Here is his picture," I say, handing her my phone. She takes it, glancing at the image while we wait for the traffic lights to change.

"He is cute. Nice body. You have to date him," she suggests, handing me back my phone.

I shoot her a look. "Don't give me that look. You're old enough to date, baby girl," she encourages, handing me my phone.

"Yeah, but there's Dad," I point out, locking my phone.

"What about him?" she asks, genuinely curious.

"He is my father, and he believes I don't need any distractions," I say, acknowledging the unspoken rule in our household.

"Honey, you need to have a bit of fun else you'll be this bitter person. You could really use some sex in your life" I catch her eye, sending a sultry glance her way before playfully poking her.

"MOM!"

Her gaze meets mine, a mischievous twinkle dancing in her eyes. "What? I'm just saying, at least if you were having sex you wouldn't be this tense and uptight... that's only if it's great sex"

She proudly points a slender finger, adorned with delicate rings, emphasizing her sense of contentment.

"Look at me," she declares with a self-assured smile, "I'm a happy and satisfied soul."

Her words hang in the air, a boastful melody that clashes with my own emotions. Disgust creeps into my expression, tainting the otherwise serene atmosphere. My mother, in her unabashed openness, reveals a facet of herself that is too intimate for my taste.

"MOM! I'm still your daughter," I protest, my tone a mixture of discomfort and reprimand

She laughs, a carefree sound that dances through the air, unburdened by my discomfort.

"All I'm saying," she continues with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "is that you could use some great sex"

It's Saturday, the anticipation of a spa day bubbling within me like a well-kept secret. The morning sun kisses my room as I wake up, and I indulge in a refreshing shower. With the scent of morning still clinging to my skin, I meticulously make my bed, the ritual of order soothing my senses.

Clad in soft pajamas, I descend the stairs, the beats of Wizkid's "Fever" resonating in my ears through the earphones. My heart syncs with the rhythm, and I can't help but sing along, the lyrics weaving through the air like a whispered promise. The song is on repeat, a testament to its hold on me.

Why this euphoria, you ask? Perhaps it's the residue of yesterday's magic. Bantubonke Mtwá, the orchestrator of my newfound joy, granted me my first real kiss. The memory lingers, a sweet echo of emotions. As I prepare breakfast, the melody of his kiss accompanies my every move.

He didn't mince words after our lips met. With conviction in his eyes, he declared himself, insisting that he'd be a fool to let the boys of Cape Town toy with my affections. He desires exclusivity, a claim on my heart, and he promises to reciprocate by being mine alone. The air is charged with the unspoken promise of a journey into uncharted territory, and I savor the lingering taste of his kiss as I embark on the day's adventures.

I bask in the happiness that courses through my veins, a radiant glow painting my world. However, the tranquility is shattered by the unexpected sound of the door unlocking. Past 6 in the morning, the house still cloaked in silence, and yet, there's a presence at the door.

In strides my father, dressed entirely in black, a beanie crowning his head. Car keys dangle from his fingers, and his clothes bear the stains of an untold journey. His unexpected appearance startles both of us. His eyes meet mine, and we share a moment of mutual surprise.

"Marhadebe, what are you doing up this early?" he questions, his use of my clan name signaling a seriousness that hangs in the air.

"Making breakfast. Where are you coming from, Rhadebe?" I inquire, arms crossed in front of my chest, observing him from head to toe.

"I, uhm... I went jogging. I needed to clear my head," he responds, a touch of uncertainty in his voice. I can't help but chuckle, the absurdity of the situation not lost on me.

"Sho," I reply casually.

"Uhm, Rhadie, can we keep this between us?" he requests, a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. My chance to finally ask for that coveted car presents itself.

"On one condition," I declare, raising my index finger.

"What's that?" he asks, scrutinizing me.

"I need a car," I assert. He gazes at me, contemplation etched on his features, before finally nodding in agreement.

"Fine! When you get back, it will be parked outside," he assures, heading toward the door. However, as he turns, a sudden realization strikes me. There's a gun tucked into his pants behind. I gasp, clasp my mouth in shock, and he senses my unease.

"You'll text me the car you want, right?" he says nervously. I nod, still processing the revelation that my father owns a gun. How? When? Why? Countless questions swirl in my mind. Despite the confusion, I shake off the thoughts, focusing on the task at hand.

Soon, the rhythmic sounds of chopping fill the kitchen as I prepare breakfast. My mind, however, remains entangled in the mystery of my father's possession of a gun. As I finish, I go to each family member's room, summoning them to the dining area.

"Where's Dad?" I inquire, my eyes shifting toward Mom as she settles into her seat.

"He's still sleeping, went jogging this morning. Must be drained," she explains. A part of me contemplates sharing what

I overheard, but the allure of the unknown holds me back. Ignorance is bliss, they say, and if my father is involved in something shady, perhaps there's a reason. Why else would he own a gun? So many unanswered questions linger.

I let the matter rest, and we engage in light conversations over breakfast. After finishing my meal, I place the dish in the sink and retreat to my room, contemplating the strange dynamics within my family. My room, a mere two doors away from my parents', offers a proximity that unveils more than intended.

Their door, half closed, becomes a stage for an unexpected revelation. My father's voice rises in agitation as he shouts at someone, presumably on the phone. I eavesdrop, my curiosity piqued.

"If Ayola finds out about this, I am dead!" he exclaims angrily. "I don't care how you fix it! Just fucking fix it, and make sure my wife doesn't find out about it!"

The abrupt end to the call leaves me bewildered. What is going on? I tiptoe away from the door

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choosing not to pry further. My mind races with unanswered questions as I head back to my own space.

As I settle in, my phone vibrates incessantly, flooded with messages and missed calls. It's Bantubonke Mtwá, the source of

my current distraction from the complexities of life. He's been a pleasant surprise, showering me with daily poems that unveil a side I never knew existed. Although I'm content, a lingering doubt persists—can anyone be this perfect?

I decide to indulge in the moment, playing "Mad Over You" by Runtown while changing into clothes. Mom is likely showering, and we have a spa appointment at 10 am.

Just as I finish changing, Bantu calls. I answer with a smile, greeting him as "Mr. Mtwā."

"Beginning to think I've been dumped," he teases.

"I wouldn't dare dream of that. I was making breakfast," I reply.

"So she can cook? Mmmh," he jests.

"I said breakfast, not the last supper," I laugh. He suggests taking me out later, but I inform him of our spa plans. He proposes meeting afterward, and we agree to FaceTime.

As the call shifts to video, I see him lying topless, exuding a magnetic charm. We engage in playful banter, and he expresses the desire to see me in the morning.

"I look the same way I did yesterday morning," I protest.

"That was yesterday. I want to see how you look today," he insists. Rolling my eyes, I oblige, switching to FaceTime.

The conversation takes an unexpected turn as I decide to share something personal.

"So, I know it's early in our relationship and all, but I feel like you must know," I begin, catching him off guard. "Bonke, I'm a virgin." A moment of silence ensues, and I sense his confusion.

"I'm waiting for you to come up with your point, beautiful," he finally says, leaving me puzzled and uncertain about his reaction.

Bantubonke's words resonate through the air, a sincere declaration that catches me off guard. His honesty pierces through my preconceived notions, and a moment of realization dawns. What if he's genuine? What if my assumptions about his intentions were unfair?

"Sinokuhle, listen," he begins, a tone of authenticity in his voice. "If I was in this for the sex, then I wouldn't be doing all this. Not to sound like a jerk or anything, but I wouldn't put in this much effort to get into your pants, babe. I'm in this because I like you. I want to know you outside the bedroom, and maybe, with time, inside the bedroom, of which I'm in no rush for the bedroom part. You're a cool chick, not at all what I was expecting. There's a mystery to you that I just can't help but be drawn to, and if you will let me, can we just do things in the right order?"

His words hang in the air, and for a moment, I feel a twinge of guilt for misjudging him. Could he truly be sincere?

"Sure," I respond, contemplating the possibility that my initial reservations might have been unfounded.

"Sure as in we're doing this?" he seeks confirmation with a hint of enthusiasm. I smile and nod, deciding to give this a chance.

"I could kiss you right now," he playfully suggests.

"Bye, Bantubonke!" I retort, feigning annoyance.

"Come on, don't be like that now," he pleads.

"I have to get dressed," I explain, deflecting his playful advances.

"Can I watch?" he teases with a mischievous smile.

"NO!" I scold, and he laughs.

"I'm going to be starved in this relationship, shame," he jokes.

"Bye, Bonke," I say, dropping the call on him. I proceed to get dressed, choosing navy blue high-waist jeggings, a white vest crop top, and white sneakers. My hourglass-shaped body, inherited from my mother, looks cute in the ensemble. I spray my braids and leave them hanging loose. After taking a few mirror selfies, I walk out.

I encounter my parents leaving their room. Mom is stunning in a white maxi dress with a navy blue handbag, sandals, and her hair hanging loosely. Dad whistles, making a playful comment about dropping us off and fetching us later.

"Stand together and let me take pictures of you guys," he suggests, and we oblige, striking poses. My little sister joins us, and we take a few more pictures. All three of us are dressed in white and navy blue, a coordinated and stylish trio. As we head downstairs, I start posting some of our pictures on social media, quickly garnering attention. The perks and pitfalls of being Ayola's daughter manifest, prompting me to keep my Instagram account private. The scrutiny and interest in our lives are the inevitable consequences of our family's public image.

Dad's unexpected move involves having Mom's car delivered to the spa, citing an urgent work matter. I can't shake the feeling that it's connected to the mysterious phone call he received earlier. As we arrive, we notice a white mini cooper parked behind Mom's car, sparking Mom's curiosity.

"Were you expecting any visitors?" she questions, turning to me. I shake my head, indicating that I wasn't anticipating anyone.

"nope," I reply.

She looks at the car one last time before getting out of the car. We all exit and head inside. In the kitchen, I casually mention Bantu's desire to take me out.

"So Bantu called, wants to take me out," I say as we walk inside the kitchen.

"If that's your way of asking to go out, then sure, as long as he brings you back before 7," Mom says, giving her approval.

"Hey Nono, whose car is that?" Mom asks, seeking clarification.

"Hi Ma'am. Sir said it was Sino's and the keys are in her room on her bed," Nono, our housekeeper, informs Mom.

Mom turns to me, and I shrug, not having a concrete answer to her unspoken question.

"Thank you, Nono," Mom acknowledges, then gives me a look that demands an explanation.

"I have no idea what made Dad get me a car," I admit, receiving a bored look from Mom. It seems she expects more, but I'm at a loss for words.

"Fine," she concedes and heads upstairs.

"So, Dad finally bought you a car," Saney remarks as she walks in behind me.

"I guess so..." I respond.

"Let's go for a spin," she suggests excitedly.

"NO! I have to be somewhere," I quickly refuse, leaving her in the lounge. Saney can be very nosy. As I descend the stairs, I bump into my brother.

"Hello! So when are we taking your new baby for a spin?" he asks.

"When I'm not busy," I reply, leaving him there. In my room, I change into a dress, regretting the choice of jeans due to the blazing heat. I opt for a short umbrella dress, a denim jacket, and sandals. I text Bonke my location, and he responds immediately, informing me that he's on his way. After fixing my lipstick, I head down, feeling nervous.

In the lounge, the little ones are engrossed in TV and chatting about who knows what. I text Mom, informing her that I'm on my way out, and she responds with a simple 'ok.' I can't comprehend why she's opposed to me owning a car; it doesn't make any sense to me.

Bantu calls, letting me know he's outside. I walk out and head to his car, a black BMW. I'm not well-versed in car models, but it looks sleek and impressive.

"You get more beautiful by the minute," he compliments as I settle into the passenger seat.

"Thank you, babe. You look good yourself," I reply, kissing his cheek, but he turns it into a whimsical kiss on the lips. He breaks it, clears his throat, and starts the car.

"So how was the spa date with Mommy and Sanele, right?" he asks.

"Yes, Sanele. It was relaxing. We came back glowing. How was your morning?" I inquire.

"It was okay, went to the gym, and then chilled with the guys while waiting on you," he shares, and I smile.

"So what's up with your cousin?" I ask, and he furrows his eyebrows.

"My cousin?" he questions.

"Yeah, the butch," I clarify.

He chuckles, "She wants your friend. Well, she wanted you first

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but I beat her to it."

I shoot him a look. "What? It's not like you're into girls," he says, unbothered.

"So what? I was a bet?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Not at all. You'd know already if you were. So where do you want to eat?" he asks, and I shrug.

"I don't know, what's your budget?" I inquire, and he chuckles.

"I'm not rich, but I can afford, so pick an affordable place," he reassures me.

"Uhm... Is Wimpy affordable?" I suggest, and he chuckles.

"Do you feel like eating at Wimpy?" he asks, and I shrug. I don't know how much he has, and I don't want to go for an expensive place.

"I'm thinking about your wallet here," I defend.

"Fine, I'll pick a place then," he says proudly. We drive to the waterfront, and he takes me to some fish place.

"You don't have any allergies, right?" he asks as we walk in, and I shake my head.

"None that I know of," I say. We are led to a table for two and given menus to look through. I opt for fish, chips, and calamari rings, which doesn't cost more than R100. I also order a sprite and hand the waitress my menu. He opts for what I'm having. She leaves us, and he takes my hand into his.

"So tell me about yourself, Miss Mbana," he says.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, and he chuckles.

"Is that how you're going to answer when you go for an interview?" he teases.

"No, obviously. I just wish you would ask what it is you want to know about me. Be specific, you know?" I suggest, and he nods.

"I know your parents are the ISH, that's out of the way. I know you have a little brother and sister. Your best friend is Layla, and she's your neighbor. Tell me something I don't know or won't learn about you on Instagram and Facebook," he prompts.

I think for a second. "Apart from doing 2 courses, I'm a simple person. I'm down to earth. Shy AF! I wouldn't really say I have a personality, unless you know me. I consider myself as boring and uninteresting. I don't like Panarottis much because of my siblings. My favorite drink is sprite, and I prefer chocolate and

bubble-gum milkshake. I like to eat healthy every now and then. I love writing."

He stops me. "Wait! You write?" I nod.

"Well, I don't write poetry like you; I'm more into short stories. I don't have time to write a novel and stuff," I explain.

"Then why aren't you studying literature?" he asks, and I shrug.

"I don't know; I guess I just want to make my parents proud." "I fell in love with writing when I got to high school, but fashion was always my passion since I was a little child, so it was wise to choose it instead," I explain, and he nods slowly.

"Your parents seem strict," he observes, and I chuckle.

"I wouldn't really call it strict. Well, my father is, but it's only because he wants me to be something in life, and with Computer Science, my future is already secured. I mean, I already have a job waiting for me," I say, and he nods.

"So if you hadn't done CS, then what? He wasn't going to support you?"

"Yes and no. My parents are two different people. Mom is okay with me doing whatever makes me happy, while Dad, on the other hand, is strict. If I'm going to do something, I need to have thought it through with its ups and downs and potholes along the way," I explain, and he just nods.

"Damn, your life is not fun, huh?" I shrug my shoulders.

"Well, with me, what you see is what you get. I'm doing my course because I love it. It's not often that one gets it right the first time," I say, and he nods.

"I have a scholarship paying for my fees, so as soon as I'm done, I'm leaving SA and going to live in Tokyo," he says with a smile.

"That's awesome," I respond.

"That means he's leaving next year. What's so awesome about that?" My subconscious is kind enough to remind me, but I don't need her now.

"So next year, you're leaving," I point out.

"After graduation though," he says, but that doesn't make me feel any better at all. I'm not ready. He takes my hand into his, noticing how deep in thoughts I am with this news.

"Look, don't overthink this. Let's just enjoy today and the rest of the time we have together," he says, brushing my hand, but I'm not convinced. He's leaving! Why did he even pursue me to begin with?

"What do you want from me?" I ask, and seemingly, my question has shocked him.

"I don't understand what you're asking, Sino," he says.

"What do you want from me, Bantu? You're leaving next year," I point out.

"So what? Don't you think we can make the distance work?" he asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Maybe if you were moving to anywhere here in South Africa, I would believe we can, but this is Tokyo, and..." I'm cut short by

his phone ringing. He answers it, and it's his father. Judging by his face, our date will be short-lived.

"Lwando, I thought we spoke about this," Mom yells at Dad.

"Come on, Ayola, it's just a car," he says.

"She's only doing her first year, Lwando. You still have enemies out there, or have you forgotten?" Mom says, sounding really pissed. I'm standing by their door, eavesdropping. I just came back home, it's around 5 pm. Bantu had to rush somewhere, so he dropped me off earlier than intended. My siblings aren't in their rooms or the lounge. My guess is that they went to visit a family friend or something, or they went out with Nono.

"I understand that Ayola, but it's been years since they did anything. We got rid of all of them," he says.

"NO Lwando! You are returning that car first thing Monday."

"And what must I say to Sino? She deserves it Ayola. We can't keep worrying about people that died years before Sanele could even say her first word. That car stays, and that's that," Dad says, and that's a cue for me to tiptoe to my room. I get there and sleep almost instantly. I'm woken up by my little sister patting me lightly.

"Wake up. Dinner is ready," she says, getting off my bed. I sit up.

“I’m on my way,” I say, getting off the bed to wash my face and my teeth. I get downstairs, and everyone is settled in their seats. I greet everyone and then settle in my seat.

“Thank you, daddy, it’s beautiful,” I say, and dad smiles faintly.

“Glad you like it, princess. Tomorrow we're taking it for a spin, right?”

“Hell yeah, we are,” says my little siblings. GREAT!

“Dad was talking to me,” I say, and they roll their eyes at me. They can be stupid and silly, but I wouldn’t ask for better siblings. We eat over light conversations, which mom isn’t really into.

“Dessert anyone?” Mom asks while getting up, and we all chant yes at the same time, making her giggle.

“Sino, you’ll serve it. Thando and Saney, the dishes are yours, ok?” We all nod our heads.

“Tomorrow we're attending the first services, ok?” We nod yet again. She goes to the kitchen and then makes her way upstairs.

“Dad, what did you do to mom?” asks Saney.

“What makes you think I did something?” He asks, frowning.

“Because mom is not happy, and it can only be you!” She points out, and Thando and I can’t help but laugh.

“Now I’m forced to wash dishes with Thando,” she says, frowning, and we just laugh at her.

“So your problem is washing dishes with your brother?” I ask with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes and no. I’m tired,” she whines, and we all laugh at her. She is a drama queen, this one. I pack the dishes and take them to the kitchen and then dish out dessert for everyone and serve them while we watch TV. When we're all done, I take them to the sink, say my goodnights, and go to my room. My phone is ringing, and it’s Layla.

“Miss Layla,” I say, throwing myself on my bed.

“Honey boo,” she says

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mumbling the words.

“Everything ok?”

“Yeah Yeah Yeah. Gosh, I’m so drunk. I’m at this party in Bellville,” she says, rumbling.

“But are you safe?”

“Of course. I’m here with your boyfriend and his cousin. We kissed,” I laugh.

“That is great, I guess,” I say, not knowing what to say really.

“Yeah, and I’m going home with her. Can’t you talk to your mom to let you come here?”

I laugh. “No Layla. You know how my parents are.”

“I know that your mom is cool, and your dad... Your dad is an overprotective father,” she says, making me laugh at how she said it.

“Layla, go and have fun, ok. I am sleeping.”

“NO! We are coming to fetch you, and if you don’t come out, I will blast the speakers until Mr. and Mrs. Mbana wake up,” she says, and knowing her, it’s possible. I know mom wouldn’t mind me going as long as I drink responsibly and be safe. But dad, on the other hand... That’s a problem.

“Layla, come on, don’t be like this,” I plead.

“Come through, honey, or else we're going to blast some speakers outside your crib,” she says, unbothered. Layla can be difficult.

“I’ll go ask mom and then get back to you, ok?”

“That’s all I ask. Your boyfriend is sulking here,” she says, and I chuckle.

“Kiss him for me, ok?”

I say, “I love you, but we're not those kinds of friends,” she says, dropping the call. I laugh at how serious she got. I go to mom’s room, carrying my phone. I knock once and walk in. She’s on the phone with someone, and the call seems intense.

“Mom,” I say, sitting on her bed.

“Listen, mom, I’ll call you tomorrow, ok?”... “Bye, mom,” she says, ending the call.

“What if I wanted to greet grandma?” I say sulking.

“Then you can call her from your phone. What’s up?” she asks, and suddenly nerves kick in.

“Layla invited me to a party in Bellville, and it’s totally cool if you don’t want me to go,” I say, speaking really fast. She chuckles.

“Sure. Just be safe and don’t drink too much,” she says, chilled as ever.

“How come you're not strict?” She shrugs.

“I don’t see the reason for me to be. Sino, I want you to live your life and enjoy it to the fullest so that when you're ready to

settle down, you settle down without doing things you were supposed to do during your youth. I mean I had the best youth, though I was doing the things I did out of rebellion, but I had the best youth ever, and I want you guys to do the same but responsibly and in the right way,” she says, brushing my knee.

“Yeah, but what about dad? He’s as strict as they come,” I say, and she giggles.

“Let me deal with your father, ok?” she says.

“Go have fun, baby. Just be safe, ok?” She says, and I smile, kissing her cheek before leaving her room. I get to mine and text Layla, then shower real quick and wear something decent: jeans and a t-shirt with sneakers. I’m not trying to get laid now. When I get out, I get a text from Layla, all excited, telling me that she’s going to get me super sloshed.

I don’t drink; I am an angel, you guys. I am nothing like my mother was in her teen years. That woman lived her life to the fullest—she partied, drank, and at some point, she fooled around with girls. Mom’s parents were always called to school for her behavior, but she was an A student despite all the things she did. When I ask her why she was so rebellious, she tells me it’s because her parents were never around, and she did everything she did to get their attention. It makes sense why she’s worked so hard to build such strong relationships with my siblings and me. I admire her for that. Mom was a wild one.

This one time, she told me how she and dad met, and the story was pretty graphic. I'm talking 18+ stuff. They had sex before getting into any kind of relationship. It's funny and crazy, you guys.

Well, the party was interesting. For the first time, I tasted alcohol—wine. Bae was not so happy about that. He said he doesn't want me drinking and he likes me all innocent and whatnot, telling me to never touch alcohol again and a whole lot more. He practically lectured me about it. On the other hand, Layla was excited.

Anyway, it's Tuesday, and Layla and I just got out of class, heading to the cafeteria before I have to attend my fashion classes. My life sucks! I get in and sit on Bae's lap, hugging him. I haven't seen him all day, okay? Shoot me!

"Hey beautiful," he says, kissing my neck. Damn, that feels good. That kiss alone sends an impulse to my nookie. OK!

"I missed you," I say, whispering.

"I missed you too. What time is your class?" he asks.

"5:30," I say, eating his fries.

"You'll be fine, babe," he says, kissing my cheek.

"So, Mrs. B," says the cousin, whose name is Bathabile but prefers to be called Thap's. I don't know why, and I never asked.

"Yes, Thap's," I say, turning to her.

“So there’s a party at my crib this Friday. You coming through?” she says.

“I have a test at 7 this Friday,” I say, and she looks at me, frowning.

“What do you mean you have a test at 7? The party starts later than that,” she says.

“Yeah, but I can’t make it, Thap’s,” I say with a shrug.

“What are you afraid I’m going to do to you, sweet cheeks? I mean, you can only enjoy whatever it is I could possibly do to you,” she says with a smirk.

“Bathabile, watch it!” Bantu warns.

“It’s okay, babe, if you can’t make it,” he says.

“Come, let’s take a walk,” he whispers in my ear, so I stand up, and we walk out, leaving the guys chatting.

“So tomorrow, we have this thing at home whereby my parents do a thing for my late sister,” I look at him; I did not even know he had a sister.

“You had a sister?” I say.

“Yeah. She died... or at least that’s what we think happened. She went to school, and she never came back. That was 10

years ago,” Bantu is 19, that means he was 9 when his sister was taken from them.

“I’m sorry,” I say, not knowing what to say or how to offer comfort. I stop and pull him to my size and hug him tightly.

“I’m so sorry, babe,” I say.

“It’s, uhhm... it’s okay,” he breaks out of my arms.

“I’m okay. So, can you pull through after school tomorrow? Dinner is at 7 pm,” he says, and I just nod. Wednesdays, I don’t have Fashion classes anyway. We continued walking.

“Thank you, Sino. Quick warning, my parents are kind of weird in a way,” he says. Then it hits me. I’m going to meet his parents. Am I ready to meet them? It hasn’t even been a month, and already he’s introducing me. FLIP! What am I going to wear?

“Babe, isn’t it a family thing?” I ask, hoping to get an escape from meeting the parents.

“It is, but you are part of my life, and I would like for you to come spend tomorrow with me and my family. I love you, Sinokuhle,” he says, and my heart melts instantly. The way he says my name... aaaaah.

“Uhhm, I will be there, then. I have to talk to my parents first,” I nod.

“I love you, Bantubonke,” I say, and he chuckles and kisses me, bending down to my level. I never knew I was this short. He breaks the kiss and looks into my eyes while still cupping my face.

“You are so short, you know that,” he says, pecking my nose. I push him.

“Yeah, whatever. Nobody asked you to be this tall smarty,” I say, and he chuckles, pulling me to him.

“You're cute, so that counts for something. You being this short has the potential to get me to agree to whatever you want,” he says, and I look at him. He smiles, making me smile too.

“Yeah, whatever, Bonke,” I say, poking him.

“Need me to wait for you until your last class?” he asks, making that face of his I can never say no to. GOD, I’m whipped!

“I have a car now... remember,” I say, and he chuckles.

“What’s your point, Sinokuhle?” I smile.

“I can drive myself home...” I say, and he laughs.

“Still waiting for your point here,” he says, and I poke him, making him laugh.

“I don’t want you driving alone at night, it’s not safe,” he says.

“Yeah, and I don’t want you driving alone at night cause it’s not safe,” I say, brushing his cheek. He leans in on my touch.

“I’m the man here, not you,” he says.

“Whatever, babe. Let’s go get something to eat; I am hungry,” I say.

“Smart ass,” he says, nudging me, and I can’t help but giggle. We walk back to the cafeteria, get something to eat, and join his friends and Layla.

“Babe, you're not answering the question,” says Thaps.

“But I answered you, what more do you want?” Layla defends.

“B, Mrs. B. The question here is, what do you do when you catch your partner cheating? And Layla’s response was, cheating is for married people.” I laugh because that answer really does sound like something Layla would say.

“I don’t know; I guess if you really love a person, then you stay and work things out,” Bantu says.

“And what about you, Sino?” asks Sizwe, another hottie in Bae’s squad.

“I don’t know. I mean, I doubt things are ever the same again. The trust is broken and what’s a relationship without trust,” I say.

“So if Bantu cheated on you, would you leave him?” asks Thaps, but I shrug.

“I don’t know. If I stay, then he would probably live the rest of his life making up for things. I mean, cheating is not a relationship up or down type of situation.”

Layla smiles at me for my response.

“I’m so proud of you. Your first relationship and you already know so much,” she says.

“None of us are married here. None of us made vows to the other in front of a whole congregation and God and vowed to stay loyal to one person until death. As long as we keep that in mind, then it’s not cheating; we’re just searching for The One,” says Layla, and Thaps smiles.

“So if you caught me between some other girl’s legs, you wouldn’t throw a fit about it?” she asks with a smug.

“I wouldn’t because I understand that there’s something that she has that I don’t,” Layla says cheerfully. WOW!

“But shouldn’t love conquer all?” asks another hot friend of Bantu’s, named Nathi.

“I don’t think ‘Love conquers all’ includes cheating and being cheated on,” I say.

“I mean, the Bible is against adultery. It clearly states that if you look at another person other than your partner in any lustful manner, then you’ve already cheated.” Says Sizwe.

“If we're going to quote the Bible, then we should also quote that sex before marriage is a sin, but it hasn't stopped any of us, now has it?” says Thaps.

“You have a point. But...” says Bantu, but Thaps cuts him off.

“No buts, cuz, we have all sinned one way or the other.”

“I get that Thaps, but if that’s the case, then why do we get horny before marriage?” asks Bantu, and we all laugh.

“I mean, think about it. If we're not supposed to have sex before marriage, then we shouldn't be getting horny before marriage,” says Bae, and I can't help but laugh at his logic.

“That’s why we have hands, though,” says Thaps.

“Yeah, but fondling yourself is also a sin,” I say.

“Every nice thing is a sin according to the Bible,” says Thaps, frowning.

After all that talking and eating, Bantu accompanies me to class, and when I get out of class, he is waiting for me near my car... This boyfriend of mine!

I take a deep breath before walking in. He's holding my hand, but it doesn't change the fact that my palms are sweaty and itchy. 'I'm not ready to meet his parents just yet. Why did I even come here in the first place? Okay, there's no going back, Sino, time to put on a smile on that pretty face and put on a show.'

"You okay?" he asks as we make our way through the kitchen.

"Yes, I'm okay... just nervous," I say. He chuckles.

"Don't worry, they're awesome and chilled people. They're going to love you," he assures, but I'm not convinced at all. What if?

"Mom, dad, this is Sinokuhle Mbana. Sino, these are my parents, Mr. Bonke and Mrs. Thandi Mtwana," he says. His mother smiles.

"It's nice to finally put a face to the name. Nice to meet you, Sino," she says, pulling me into a hug. 'Okay, not what I was expecting.' I return the hug to be polite.

"Nice to meet you too, Mah," I say, breaking the hug.

"Thank you for inviting me into your home," I say, and she offers a smile.

“Sinokuhle Mbana, nice to meet you,” the father says, shaking my hand.

“You're not in any way related to Lwando Mbana, are you?” he asks, and I raise an eyebrow with a fake smile.

“I'm his daughter,” I say, breaking the handshake. He and his wife exchange looks. 'Okay, what am I missing?'

“Your father and I were once good friends, that's all,” he says, but I'm not convinced; his look says something else.

“Okay, Dad, stop being creepy,” Bantu says, taking my hand.

“Let's, uh, sit down while I go fetch dinner. You don't happen to have any allergies, right?” I shake my head, and she smiles and walks out. His father keeps stealing glances at me, which makes me feel uncomfortable.

“So, my son tells me you're studying Computer Science and Fashion Design,” he says, and I nod.

“Why two courses? Aren't you a little young to be putting this much pressure on yourself?” I shake my head.

“It's good pressure. I get to widen my options when job hunting,” I say, and he nods.

“I take it your father is the one who got you to do Computer Science?” he says, and I nod.

“It’s just like Lwando. I’m not surprised. Your father and I went to university together, studied the same course and all. He was always top of the class while I came second. I guess our friendship ended when he went to work for your mother’s father,” he says, and I just nod, not knowing what to say.

“Okay, Dad, enough with the interrogation. You're making her uncomfortable,” Bantu finally rescues me, brushing my hand.

“I just want to know the first girl you’ve ever brought home, that’s all. I mean, there had to be something special about her for you to bring her home today of all days,” his father says. The wife walks in.

“I hope you're hungry,” she says, referring to me and offering a warm smile.

“She diets, this one,” says Bantu. I shoot him a look.

“What? You didn’t tell me not to mention it,” he says.

“I don’t diet; I just maintain, that’s all,” I say, and his mother chuckles.

“That’s okay; these boys will never understand,” she says, sitting down.

“May we, uh, bow down our heads and pray,” she says, offering me her hand and the other her husband. We all close our eyes and bow our heads while her husband prays. He says amen,

and we all dig in. The food is good, no doubt. We eat over light conversations

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with them getting to know me and me getting to know them. After dinner, dessert is served, and then we sit and talk over light conversations.

“So, Miss Mbana, did you enjoy yourself tonight?” asks Mr. Mtwā, and I nod.

“Yes, sir, I did, thank you. Mrs. Mtwā, your food was amazing,” I say.

“Hope it doesn’t ruin your figure now,” she says, and we all laugh.

“It won’t,” I say.

“I should drive Sino home now,” he says.

“Isn’t it a little early?” says his mother.

“I have an assignment I have to submit before midnight, Mah,” I say.

“Ahhh mahn, I’m sorry,” she says.

“It was really nice having you here, honey,” she says, pulling me in for a hug.

“Thank you again for the invite,” I say, breaking the hug.

“It was nice meeting you both,” I say, shaking Bantu’s father’s hand.

“It was nice meeting you too, Miss Mbana. Greet your father for me, okay?” he says.

“Will do. Bye, guys,” I say as we walk out hand in hand. That was the weirdest dinner I have ever been to!

“You okay? I’m sorry my father can be a little too much at times,” he says, opening the car door for me.

“Don’t worry about it. I had a great time,” I say.

“You didn’t tell me you had an assignment,” he says, and I chuckle.

“No, I don’t, seeing that you wanted to get rid of me, I figured,” I say, and he chuckles.

“No, actually I wanted to have you all to myself for a few more minutes before I take you home,” he says, kissing me, which I gladly respond to. We break it when we hear someone call out for us, it’s his father.

“You forgot your phone,” he says, handing it to me over the window on Bantu’s side.

“Thank you, sir. I don’t know how it must have fallen out of my bag,” I say. He smiles.

“Things happen,” he says.

“Goodbye, kids,” he says, and Bantu starts the car. I really don’t know how my phone ended out of my bag because I never took it out. I unlock it and I notice my father called, and the phone was answered. Why would he answer my phone without my permission? I check the time call, and they spoke for a whole minute. Something is going on here! I lock my phone and put it in my bag. The only time I ever left my bag was when Bantu took me to the bathroom; could his father have taken my phone out of my bag then? I mean, it would make sense... We drive in silence, listening to music. He takes me to this place that has a beautiful view of the city.

“This is where I come to clear my head,” he says. Cape Town is such a beautiful place at night! My phone rings, and it’s my father.

“I have to take this; it’s my father,” I say, and he lets me be. I walk away from him, answering the phone.

“Dad.”

“Sino, where the hell are you?” Dad asks, sounding furious.

“I’m at Bantu’s home for dinner, remember,” I say.

“Come home now!” he says.

“But da...”

“NOW SINOKUHLE,” he says before cutting the call on me. I am confused AF! What’s the deal with him?

I walk back to Bantu.

“That was my father; he says I need to come home. It’s an emergency,” I say, and he frowns.

“Is everything okay?” I shrug.

“I hope so, I’m sorry,” I say.

“No, it’s okay. Let me take you home then,” he says, taking my hand. He closes my car door and walks to his side and starts the car. On the way, I’m texting mom on WhatsApp trying to find out what’s going on, but she doesn’t respond. I let her be. We get to my home and say our goodbyes, then I head inside.

“You and that boy are done, you hear me?” He says the minute I walk in the door. I’m dumbfounded.

Navigating the wild ride of father-daughter relationships feels like being on a rollercoaster, emotions soaring high. I'm basically his first shot at this whole dad thing, the opening chapter of his parenting adventure—a daughter, his pride and joy. My very first words, a cute and innocent "Dada," still echo in the memory lanes, marking my special status as his treasured daddy's girl.

Even though time has done its thing, and I've grown into my teenage years, the dad-daughter connection is as strong as ever. In his eyes, I'm forever his little girl, a feeling that sticks around. The way he looks at me is like a snapshot, freezing the moment when I first said "Dada" in that tiny voice. I've always been that daughter whose words meant the world to him.

Even though I'm a kid with both parents in the picture, my loyalty to my dad is rock-solid. Mom totally gets that there's this special spot reserved for Dad in my heart—no one else can claim it. We went through some rough patches during those teen years when I leaned on Mom for certain things, but through it all, Dad and I came out unscathed—still buds, solidly father and daughter.

I step into the room, and it's obvious Dad has been waiting for me.

"Dad," I greet. My father is that one person you can't keep secrets from. I didn't mention I was going out with Bantu, but somehow he knows. He's even aware of the party and a bunch of other things I never thought he'd find out.

"You and that boy are done!" he declares, heading to the lounge. I follow behind, feeling the tension in the air.

"Why? What did he do to you?" I ask, attempting to keep my voice steady.

"Guys, off to bed, you go," Mom intervenes, addressing my younger siblings. They pass by with pity-filled glances, and Saneey gives me a comforting kiss on the cheek before heading to her room.

"Sino, sit down, please," Mom says calmly, while Dad remains fixated on the TV. We both know he despises Generations, but he watches it anyway.

"Honey, what's going on?" Mom inquires, turning to Dad.

"Ayola, there's no sweet-talking me out of this. Sino is never seeing that boy again, and that's final!" Dad states sternly.

"Why, Daddy? What did he do? Is it his father? I saw that you called earlier, and my phone was answered," I explain, desperately seeking clarity from the man I love so much.

"It doesn't matter! Stay away from them, Sinokuhle! My word is final!" he asserts, ready to leave.

"No!" I protest. Defying him might be risky, but it's a chance worth taking. He freezes in his tracks.

"Excuse me?" he retorts.

"Lwando!" Mama warns.

"Talk to your daughter, Ayola, because if I do, blood will be spilt, and it definitely won't be mine," he declares sternly before leaving me with Mom. I collapse on the couch, defeated. Mom's arms wrap around me.

"I will talk to him, don't worry," she says, but it doesn't stop my tears. I like Bantu; he seems genuine, a good person who is nothing like his strange father. He brings me peace, love, and joy.

"I just wish he would understand. I love him, Mom," I confess, wailing.

"I know, baby. I know," she says, gently brushing my hair.

"I will talk to your father and try to make him see reason, okay?" she assures.

"What could be so bad about him, Mom? He's only 19," I say, still in tears.

"I will talk to your father, Sino. Please, just stop crying," she pleads, but I can't. I'm heartbroken by the one man who isn't supposed to break my heart.

"Come, let's get you cleaned up and off to bed, okay?" she suggests, helping me stand.

"How was the dinner?" she asks as we make our way upstairs.

"His parents are weird. His father mentioned that he and Dad went to varsity together," I share

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and she chuckles.

"How are his parents weird, baby?" I shrug.

"For starters, I think Bantu's father stole my phone only to return it," I share with my mom as we enter my room. She follows behind me, concern etched on her face. I change into my pajamas, recounting the peculiar incident.

"That makes no sense. Why would he steal your phone?" Mom questions as I shrug my shoulders.

"I don't know, Mom. My phone was in my bag the entire time. The only time I left my bag was when Bantu was showing me to the restroom. As we're about to leave, his father comes to the car, telling me I forgot my phone and then leaves. I unlock my phone and notice that Dad had called, and they spoke for a

minute or so, but Bantu's dad didn't mention that when he handed me my phone," I explain while wearing my pajamas.

"That is strange," Mom begins to respond, but my phone starts ringing—it's Layla. I signal goodnight to my mom, answering Layla and pouring my heart out about everything that happened.

"As a rebel, my advice would be to rebel, but as your friend who knows your father and cares about you, maybe your father has his reasons for wanting you to stay away from them. Maybe they're bad people, and he's just trying to protect you from them," Layla suggests. But I'm not convinced.

"No, Lay, he's being dramatic for no reason," I defend.

"Look, I'm all for team rebel against the parents and all, but don't gamble with your father; you'll lose!" she warns.

"But I like him," I say.

"I understand that, babe, really I do, but is it worth risking your relationship with your father?" she asks, and it hits home. Is it worth it? We talk some more until we both end the call, feeling sleepy.

I wake up wrapped in my blankets—strange because I don't recall getting inside them. Must have been Dad. The time is past 9; today, our class has been shifted to 1 pm. I head

downstairs, and everyone is gone, while Nono sits in the lounge catching up on SABC soapies.

"Nono," I greet.

"Hey Sino, you're late today, everything OK?" she asks with concern.

"Yeah, my class is at one today. Lecturer said something about a doctor's appointment," I say.

"Your father told me to tell you that a driver will be taking you wherever you want to go," she adds as I'm about to leave.

"Excuse me, what?" I ask, stopping in my tracks.

"Yep, that's all he said. He said you shouldn't drive your car today; someone will come fetch it around 10 or so," she explains. I just nod and head to the kitchen, making myself cereal and pondering how dramatic my father is.

I text Layla, asking her to go out for breakfast, and she agrees. She'll be here in 30 minutes—enough time for me to make my bed and shower. Layla arrives as I'm about to lotion my body. She picks out my outfit while we chat lightly. I grab my bag and car keys, then we leave while Nono is in Saney's room cleaning.

As we drive, I share with Layla about Dad telling Nono not to let me use my car.

"I'm liking this rebellious you," Layla says, laughing.

"You're crazy," I respond. Just then, my phone rings, and it's Mr. Mbana.

"You gonna answer that?" Layla asks, and I shake my head no.

"Dude, come on," she insists.

"He'll only be shouting at me, Lay, so no. He needs to chill," I say. Just then, my phone beeps with a message from Dad. I open it, and it reads, "Sinokuhle, don't f***ing test my patience! Answer that damn phone if you want to live until dinner." I read it out loud, and Layla chuckles.

"You're in sh*t," she points out.

"I know," I say, looking straight ahead. My phone keeps ringing, and it's him. I finally pick up as we wait at the stoplight.

"What?" I answer, annoyed.

"I'm not your little boyfriend, so don't you ever f***ing answer my calls like that, do you hear me?" His voice is so scary; I even regret answering his call.

"Dad, I—"

Lwando(Sino's dad)

As a husband and a father, my duty is to love and protect my family at all costs, even if it means occasionally keeping certain truths from them to ensure their safety.

Our move to Cape Town wasn't just for a change of scenery; it was a strategic decision. I was well aware that staying in Durban or Jo'burg would expose my family to constant threats. Most of the gang activity is concentrated here, and relocating to Cape Town was a tactical move to minimize the risks. If Ayola, my wife, knew about my past life as 'Sniper,' it could jeopardize our safety. Despite my promise to her to stay out of shady dealings, the allure of that lifestyle remains strong.

Ayola and I had decided not to get Sino a car until she completed school, but circumstances dictated otherwise. With my complex dealings and the need to ensure Sino's safety, providing her with a car became a necessary compromise. Ayola is rightfully concerned about the safety of our kids, fearing that my enemies might target them to get to me. While I have the best security in place, I can't openly disclose the extent of the measures taken, as Ayola would likely raise objections and start probing, leading to unnecessary drama.

Sino, our daughter, is out meeting her boyfriend's parents, defying my advice against dating. Ayola, being the influencer, convinced me to let Sino navigate her own choices now that she's in varsity. Accepting that your little girl is no longer so little is a challenging reality for any father. As we sit watching TV, my wife's head rests on my shoulder, and the kids occupy the other couch, sharing in the simple moments of family togetherness.

I receive a message from a friend, updating me on Sino's location.

"Babe, there's a call I need to make, okay?" I say to my wife.

"We said no bringing work home," she responds, sounding bored.

"I know, babe. I promise it will only take a minute," I assure her, kissing her forehead. She removes her head, and I get up to walk to the study, dialing Chip's number.

"Chip, who lives in this house?" I ask, settling into the chair in front of my laptop.

"The boy's parents," he replies.

"I need names or pictures or something, Chip!" I demand.

"A Bonke and Thandi Mtwá. Today marks 10 years since the disappearance of their daughter. I'll have a file ready for you

before the end of the day," he says, and I receive an email with pictures of the family my daughter is currently visiting.

"Thanks. Talk later," I say, dropping the call without waiting for his response. When will I ever get a break? My daughter is in my enemy's house, and who is to say she will come out alive? I dial her number, and it rings for a while before she answers.

"Sinokuhle," I say.

"Sniper!" says a voice I last heard 10 years back.

"Where's my daughter? Why are you answering her phone?" I ask, both pissed and panicking but calm enough not to alarm him.

"She's very beautiful. Filled with so much energy and life. She reminds me of mine," he says proudly.

"If you dare lay a hand on her... So help me God! I will kill your whole family while you watch," I threaten, but he cuts me off.

"She's pretty. I really hope you can protect her," he says, and the call is abruptly cut off. I'm panicking, scared, and overwhelmed with emotions. I don't know what to do. If I talk to Ayola, she'll start panicking, and I might lose my family. Think, Lwando!

"Baby!" shouts my beautiful wife, walking into the study.

"I'm sorry that took longer than expected," I say, meeting her halfway, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her to me. She smiles.

"Even after all these years," I say, and she smiles.

"I'll always choose you," she says, planting a kiss on my lips. She stops.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing babe, I must be tired," I say, but she shoots me a look.

"I know you, Lwando! What are you hiding from me?" she asks, removing my hands from her waist.

"That boy is bad news," I admit. She raises an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?" she inquires.

"Don't tell me you went digging up things about him," she says, and I shrug.

"Lwando, he's 19! What's so bad about him? He is a child," she defends.

"Sino needs to stay away from him!" I say sternly, walking to the table.

"Lwando!" she shouts.

"Don't yell at me, Ayola! Sino stays away from that boy, and that's that!" I declare, calling her phone again while walking

out. Never has Sino defied me before, especially for a boy. What if Bonke told her things about me, things I did in the past? What if she knows I was once a sniper?

Ayola walks into the room, visibly upset.

"What the heck was that?" she asks, and I shrug my shoulders.

"No! You're not going to give me that! You can't tell our daughter to stay away from the first guy she likes and expect me to just sit back and shut up. Why, Lwando?" she demands, looking at me, waiting for an answer. How do I tell my wife this without losing her and my entire family?

"Well?" she insists.

"I need not explain myself to you as to why our daughter must stay away from that boy! Need I remind you that Sino is doing two courses, and she does not have the time to be playing around with some boy," I say, taking my T-shirt off.

"Damn that! My brother warned me against you, Lwando, but look at where we are today," she retorts, delivering what seems like a low blow.

"And? Do you regret not listening to him?" I ask, folding my arms with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm starting to!" she admits, and her words cut deeper than intended. She walks to the closet, and I follow behind her.

"You don't mean that, Kitten," I say. "Kitten" is a nickname she and her best friend came up with from a time when she and I had just started fooling around. Apparently, I made her "kitten" wet, and so I was called Mr. Kitten Wetter. Girls give the weirdest nicknames for us when talking to their friends, shame.

She shoots me a look and then turns to change into her pajamas.

"Kitten, please," I plead.

"Are you ready to tell me what's really going on?" she asks, turning to me, naked on top. Her body, her curves, are still perfect enough to turn me on. Even at 36, my wife is still able to do the damn thing.

"Ayola," my voice comes out lower than intended. She turns back and takes her sweatpants off, revealing her sexy red lace underwear. How do you argue with a naked person? Are you even able to think straight? I'm tempted to pin her on this chest of drawers and make the most of the moment. I touch her shoulders.

"Leave me alone

Advertisement

" she says sternly, yanking me off, then bends over to wear her pajama bottoms. I can't resist that, and I turn her to me, picking her up and placing her on the ottoman in the center of our

closet. She's yelling and hitting me, but I think we all know Ayola can't resist me even after all these years.

"Lwando!" she argues as I part her legs and rub her over her underwear.

"Please," I plead while kissing her neck. In the intimate cocoon of desire, her body becomes my canvas, a territory to explore and claim. Despite her attempts to resist the inevitable, the allure is undeniable. Every touch and kiss elicits a response from her, a symphony of desire that escapes in a melodic moan. I gently remove her underwear, devouring her essence, evoking a passionate scream that echoes my name.

Carrying her to the bed, my arousal palpable, I position her as I desire. Between her legs, our connection intensifies, her breath becoming a rhythmic melody of pleasure. Shedding my pants and boyleg, I delve into her with fervor, eliciting gasps that accompany the sweet symphony of our entwined bodies. Her coffin-shaped nails dig into my back, a testament to the intensity of our union.

As she arches her back, enveloping me completely, I find solace in this shared sanctuary. Being inside her is not just physical, it's a spiritual homecoming, a transcendental experience that fulfills the very essence of my existence. Our bodies entwine, reaching a crescendo that culminates in an explosive release, leaving us both breathless.

Shifting to a new tempo, we embrace the passionate dance of doggy style. Her movements are a sensual rhythm, twerking on my desire as I'm immersed in sensations only she can evoke. Pulling her close, I play with her breasts, my fingers dancing in sync with the pleasure building within her. Her moans become a symphony, each note a testament to the ecstasy we share.

"Come for me, kitten," I command, my words a sultry invitation.

"Come with me," She utters breathlessly, our shared release echoing in the room. Collapsing onto the bed, she and I, intertwined souls calling out each other's names in the aftermath. As she lies beneath me, I surrender to the weight of passion, kissing the side of her neck with lingering desire.

"I love you, Ma'Mbana," I confess, my words a tender declaration amidst the echoes of our shared ecstasy.

"I'm still mad at you," she admits, the words punctuated by the effort to catch her breath. I chuckle, a playful response to the lingering tension, and rise from her to recline on my back. Pulling her to me, I envelop her in my arms, a haven for her weary form. Drained, she finds solace on my chest, her haven.

Kissing her head gently, I cocoon us under a throw, our naked bodies shielded from the world. In this quiet aftermath, the air is thick with the scent of love and lingering passion, as we

succumb to the embrace of a shared slumber, bound by the intimacy of our connection.

In the hushed aftermath of our passionate encounter, as she lays peacefully in slumber, I carefully disentangle myself, donning my pajama bottoms. With utmost care, I wrap her in the warmth of blankets, ensuring not to disturb her serene repose. A gentle kiss on her head seals my departure, and I silently make my way out.

The dim light of the hallway guides me to Sino's room, where she sleeps undisturbed beneath the covers. I tuck her in, pressing a tender kiss on her forehead. Just as I'm about to leave, her phone stirs to life with a message from Bantu, a plea for reconciliation. Swiftly, I note his number and save it on my phone, returning hers to its place, leaving the room with the same tranquility I found it.

A silent check on Saney and Thando precedes my journey to the study. With anticipation, I open the email from Chip, unveiling the information I sought about this mysterious figure, Bonke. A tragic tale unfolds—his daughter lost a decade ago, a heartache masterfully orchestrated by our gang.

Dialing her number, I brace for the connection that ties us to the shadows. The phone rings, a dissonant melody in the quietude, until she answers.

"Boss," she utters, a mix of surprise and concern evident in her voice.

"You need to come back home!" I command, the urgency cutting through the air.

"Sir, what are you talking about? Why now?" she queries, a genuine worry coloring her words.

"My daughter is dating your brother, and you know your father. Get on the first plane here, Hlumelo!" I declare, the weight of familial ties and unforeseen connections tightening the grip on our destinies. Without waiting for further deliberation, I end the call, leaving a sense of impending revelation lingering in the charged silence.

Bonke, a specter from the past, is a dangerous figure, a former friend turned adversary in the intricate dance of alliances and betrayals. We shared a history, once comrades in the echoes of school days, until the diverging paths of loyalty and ambition tore us apart. Ayola's father became the architect of my destiny, leading me into a world of shadows where friendships crumbled into enmity.

Our lives became entwined in the threads of opposing forces, a relentless war that spared no one. Tragically, Bonke's daughter became a casualty, caught in the crossfire of our vendettas, leaving us with the scars of a shared tragedy. I reflect on the

complexities of our choices, the collateral damage that stains our hands.

Concern for my own family takes precedence. The revelation about my daughter's involvement with Bonke's brother adds a new layer of intricacy to the already convoluted tapestry of our lives. I harbor a visceral aversion to any harm befalling my kin, fueled by a primal instinct that transcends alliances and vendettas.

Turning off my phone, I navigate the dimly lit corridors of my home, ensuring all doors are secured and security systems engaged. The silence that envelops the estate is both a shield and a testament to the concealed conflicts within. Returning to the sanctuary of my room, I find my wife still peacefully asleep, untouched by the turmoil that defines our existence.

Slipping into bed beside her, I pull her close, seeking solace in the warmth of her presence. In the embrace of familial love, I let the weight of the world dissipate, finding respite in the sanctuary of our shared sleep, unaware of the shadows that linger on the horizon.

LWANDO

The dissonant symphony of shattering glass and screeching car tires reverberates through the air, a sudden intrusion that jolts me awake. Fear grips me, a visceral response to the unexpected cacophony that disrupts the tranquility of the night. In the ominous silence that follows, the unknown lingers, casting shadows on the edges of consciousness. Every creak and rustle becomes an unsettling prelude to the unknown, and I lie there, heart pounding, as the echoes of disturbance linger in the stillness, leaving me on edge, my senses heightened and alert to the looming threat that now stains the night.

"Sino" Desperation drives me to shout, a futile attempt to pierce through the dissonant chaos that now envelops my surroundings. In the midst of distant conversations and the persistent honking of cars, the silence that follows my cry is deafening. Anxiety tightens its grip, and I'm left grappling with the haunting question: What have I done?

The ominous symphony outside continues, an unpredictable dance of urban discord. My heart pounds in my chest, each beat echoing my escalating fear. Amidst the uncertainty, my only prayer resonates, a silent plea for her safety. In this moment of dread, the fervent hope that she is still alive

becomes the singular beacon in the darkness, the lifeline I cling to in the face of an impending storm.

"Sino baby talk to me please" The desperate pleas linger in the air as I hastily exit the office, the unsettling silence on the other end of the line urging me into action. Ending the call, I pivot into immediate response mode, tracking her phone's signal, a lifeline in the sea of uncertainty. The coordinates draw me closer to the heart of the city, a place fraught with danger and concealed threats.

Calling upon my network, I dispatch some of the guys to investigate the location while others scour the city's surveillance footage. The drive is a blur, anxiety coursing through my veins as I navigate the labyrinthine streets. The pulsating urgency of the situation propels me forward, each passing moment amplifying the fear gnawing at the edges of my composure.

As I approach the indicated area, the scene unfolds before me—a gathering of people, an eerie haze of smoke lingering in the air. Dread coils in my stomach, a sickening premonition. There, amidst the crowd, I spot her car, a silent witness to the unfolding tragedy. The crowd has managed to extract her and Layla from the vehicle, their lifeless forms sprawled on the unforgiving pavement.

Terrified yet compelled to confront the harsh reality, I inch closer, the gravity of the situation sinking in. The fear of what I might discover knots my stomach, but I press on, braving the unknown, hoping against hope for a glimmer of solace amidst the unfolding nightmare.

"Boss," Sitha's voice breaks through the chaos, his hand on my shoulder.

"Pick up Layla while I pick up my daughter," I instruct, a sense of urgency propelling us toward the two injured figures on the ground.

"Sir, what are you doing?" questions a woman in police uniform.

"This is my daughter! I'm taking her to the hospital," I declare, my focus solely on the motionless form of my child.

"The ambulance is on its way," she informs me. With a brief glance, I lift my daughter into my arms while Sitha attends to Layla. Racing against time, I drive to the hospital, the urgency heightened by the sight of blood on my daughter's face. The solace lies in the fact that they wore seatbelts, mitigating the severity of the damage. In the frenzied atmosphere of the emergency room, they are swiftly ushered in, leaving me with the haunting task of updating my wife.

"Sthandwa Sam," I utter as she answers, her tone oblivious to the impending news.

"Hey, what's up? I'm rushing to a meeting," she responds.

"Sino's been in an accident," I deliver, a heavy pause lingering in the air.

"Which hospital?" she inquires, her concern breaking through the casual facade.

I provide the information, but the call is abruptly dropped. In the aftermath, I turn to Sitha, the weight of responsibility heavy on my shoulders.

"Sitha, I want you to find whoever did this!" I demand, the urgency laced with a simmering anger.

"Of course, boss. You think it might have to do with Bullet?" he queries, referring to Bonke.

"If he is behind this, so help me God!" I warn, the threat hanging in the air. As he leaves to fulfill the task, I make another call, this time to Hlumelo.

"S..." she begins.

"When the hell do you land?" I interrupt, my patience worn thin.

"Sir, I can't just come there; there's a lot at stake," she attempts to explain.

"Damn that! My daughter was involved in an accident today, a day after meeting your father! If you want your little brother to live to see the next sunrise, I suggest you get on the plane now!" I declare, the urgency cutting through any semblance of formality.

Just then, my wife approaches, her grief and worry manifesting as a slap that reverberates through me.

"If anything happens to her, Lwando, I swear to God Bonke will be the least of your worries!" she warns, leaving me to confront the reality of the situation. As she heads to the receptionist, I announce our presence.

"Ayola Mbana here for Sinokuhle Mbana," I state, the receptionist's response amplifying the gravity of the situation with a solemn shake of her head.

"What does that mean?" my wife demands, her anger palpable. The urgency of the situation overrides any formalities, and I confess that I haven't filled in the necessary forms.

"I brought her in, and I didn't fill in anything," I admit, handing back the forms once my wife provides them. Realizing that Layla's parents haven't been informed, I instruct my wife to make the call.

"Kitten, please call Layla's parents," I request, a tension hanging in the air. She gives me a sharp look and walks away to make the call, leaving me to grapple with the repercussions of my actions.

When the forms are finally completed, I hand them back and make a critical phone call to Chip.

"Sho, Sniper," Chip greets.

"Anything?" I inquire.

"No sir, nothing. No driver was found in the car that hit them. The car doesn't belong to anyone. There's literally nothing, sir," Chip reports.

"Keep looking. Have one of the guys get me Bantubonke Mtwá; it's about time he and I met," I command, a sense of urgency underscoring my words. The call ends, but a message soon arrives on my phone.

"Next time she won't be so lucky, Sniper!"

I respond with my own message, a terse warning to whoever dares threaten my family.

"Check on your son!" I instruct, reaching out to the principal at Sandy's school, Jack.

"Sniper," he acknowledges.

"There's a war coming. Gear up!" I warn, the gravity of the situation pressing on us.

"Don't worry; the kids are safe in here. I'm trusting you with my daughter; don't fail me!" I emphasize, a plea and a demand in equal measure. The turbulent currents of danger are closing in, and the protection of those I hold dear becomes my paramount concern. "Sir," Lee acknowledges when I call him, a stalwart figure in Thando's school security.

"Keep an eye on Thando. There's a war coming!" I warn, the gravity of the situation reflected in my words.

"Of course, boss," he assures, and I end the call, diverting my attention back to my wife.

"Don't touch me!" she declares, striking my hands away.

"Majola," I plead, attempting to address the turmoil in her gaze.

"You looked me in the eye and lied to me, Lwando! You said you were done with this life! You said moving here meant a fresh start!" she grits her teeth, containing the urge to create a scene.

"Ayola," Layla's mother calls, stepping in. Ayola meets her halfway, and they share a brief, understanding hug.

"Sinokuhle Mbana!" a doctor calls, approaching us.

"How is she, Ray?" I inquire anxiously.

"Your daughter is fine. She hit her head hard on the wheel and sprained an ankle, but she's okay," she explains.

"I want to see her," my wife demands.

"Mrs. Mba..." the doctor begins, but my wife cuts her off.

"I want to see my daughter now, Raven!" she insists. The doctor signals for a nurse to accompany my wife to our daughter's room.

"How is my daughter? Her name is Layla Jones," Layla's mother asks.

"Your daughter is fine, just a minor cut on her forehead, but she's fine and good to go," the doctor assures.

"Can I see her?" Layla's mother requests, and the doctor calls a nurse. I'm left alone with the doctor.

"Lwando Mbana can't stay out of trouble as always," she remarks.

"Trouble loves me. On the real, is my daughter okay?" I inquire.

"Yes, Sniper, she's all good. I need to do my rounds

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" she says, walking away. I share a bit of information with Ayola, indicating that the doctor is also part of our circle.

Entering the room, Layla and her mom are talking. Layla looks up at me, tears threatening her eyes. I can't hold back my own tears.

"Daddy, I'm sorry," she says, tears streaming down her cheeks. I walk over and pull her into my arms.

"It's okay, my love," I say, brushing her hair. Ayola looks at me and shakes her head. I mouth "I'll fix this," and she rolls her eyes. We break the hug.

"How are you feeling?" I ask Layla.

"Like I got knocked by a car," she replies sarcastically.

"Oh, you got jokes now?" I tease.

She chuckles, "Daddy, I'm sorry for disrespecting you. I'm sorry for defying you, and I'm sorry for everything."

I brush her hand, "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you, and I'm sorry for pretty much everything since last night."

She smiles, and for a moment, the weight of the recent events seems to lighten, overshadowed by the relief of knowing she's okay.

"It's all good, parent. So when am I being discharged?" Layla asks, her charming smile reminiscent of her mother's.

"When the doctor says you can get out," Ayola responds.

"Mr. and Mrs. Mbana, I am sorry to cut your stay short, but this one needs to rest," Raven interjects as she walks in.

"Come on, Ray," I suggest.

"Those eyes don't work on me. Come back later during visiting hours, okay? Sino is fine; she just needs to rest and take it easy for the next couple of weeks. We still need to run a few tests just to be sure," the doctor explains.

"Okay. Baby, we'll see you later?" I say, getting up. Layla nods. I kiss her forehead, and her mother kisses her cheek, then we walk out.

She heads to her car, and I get in the passenger seat, locking the doors.

"Get out!" she demands.

"No!" I retort. She chuckles in disbelief.

"Lwando Mbana, don't you fucking test me right now! Get the fuck out of my car!" she fumes.

"Can I tell you the truth first, and then I will be out of your hair?" I plead, attempting to touch her hand, but she removes it. I am in serious trouble.

"Ten years back, I got a call from your father to come handle business this side. You and the kids were visiting my parents in the Eastern Cape at that time. I thought it was our usual money

laundering schemes, art forgery, or something along those lines. Little did I know that your father had decided to join the drug dealing business and trading," I confess, anticipating her disapproval.

She shoots me a look, and I quickly continue, "Let me finish!" She closes her mouth.

"I told him I couldn't get involved in this as it would bring unnecessary attention to you guys, and also, you would murder me. They had a plan already in place, and they just needed me to create a chip that would help them do their transportation and trade successfully without being detected. They traded drugs, human organs, and other things. My job was to create a computer chip that would bypass those airport metal detectors as the drugs that they supplied or created had some metal in them. That's where Bonke's daughter comes in. She was one of the girls they recruited to do the job. Hlumelo was 16; she was in love with one of the group members and wanted to rebel against her father, so what better way than to join his enemies?" I take a deep breath in and let it out slowly.

"Hlumelo is alive and well, living in the states, heading the business that side for your father and advancing the technologies used by the gang! A week ago or so, I got a call from your father saying he had landed in Cape Town and that he wanted to meet with me. It was about a heist they wanted

to pull. They wanted to—well, they actually hijacked a plane that was transporting international cars to here, and it was a success. When I bought Sino the car, it was to shut her up as she had seen me walk in early in the morning, so for her not to tell you, I got her the car. She still doesn't know what I'd been doing, though. But yeah, that's everything I've been hiding from you. Sino's accident was not an accident; it's revenge. Bonke thinks I killed his daughter or took her or something based on our beef or based on the hate he has for me," I explain, my voice laden with the weight of years of deceit.

She looks at me, and I can't read her face. I don't know whether to get out or stay. I'm blank.

"I'm guessing if I leave with the kids, then I'm only putting their lives in danger?" she says, her words heavy with resignation. I shrug, and she breathes out.

"Sort this out, Lwando! I want my kids safe and unharmed!" she declares firmly, and I nod.

"Of course, babe!" I affirm.

"If you dare hurt Sino's boyfriend..." she begins.

"I won't," I assure, trying to ease her concerns.

"Get out of my car. I need to breathe," she says, her agitation palpable.

"Kitten—"

"Get out, Lwando!" she demands, even more agitated. I comply, getting out and watching her drive off. I then call Sitha.

"Sho, boss," he answers.

"Where are you? Did you get the boy?" I inquire when I call Sitha.

"Yes, sir. We're at the warehouse," he responds.

"Take him to my office. Make him comfortable. I promised my wife that I wouldn't hurt him," I instruct.

"Sho, boss," Sitha acknowledges, and I end the call. After calling a few guys to keep an eye on my daughter and her friend, I drive to the office. Changing my shirt and tie, I find him looking around when I enter.

"Bantubonke Mtwá," I address him.

"Mr. Mbana, it's an honor to meet you," he responds as we shake hands.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" I mention, observing him placing Sino's picture back on the desk.

"Yes, she is, sir," he replies.

"Word is you're leaving for Tokyo straight after graduation," I remark, offering him a seat on the couch. He sits down, and so do I.

"Anything to eat or drink?" I offer, and he opts for something to drink. I instruct my PA to bring us juice.

"Yeah, uhm... I'm leaving for Tokyo," he says nervously.

"And where would that leave your relationship with my daughter? I mean, she got into an accident today, said some things to me, all because she thinks she's in love with you," I state. He looks at me, shocked.

"Is she okay? Which hospital is she in?" he asks in panic.

"She's fine. I asked you a question," I say calmly. My PA walks in with our juice and then leaves.

"I don't know. If there was a way for me to stay here, then I would," he says. I pour us juice and hand him a glass.

"I can offer you a job, mentor you even. I did computer science myself, you know, but there are terms and conditions," I propose. He looks at me, waiting.

"You break things off with Sino," I declare. He chokes on his saliva.

"As long as my daughter is dating you, she has a target on her back. Your father blames me for your sister's disappearance,

and to settle the score, he caused Sino's accident. The more she sees you, the easier it is for him to hurt her," I explain, sipping on my juice. He swallows hard.

"Your sister is alive and well. She didn't disappear; she left out of freewill, running away with a boy she was in love with," I reveal. I can tell he's afraid, but he's a bit skeptical about what I'm telling him.

"With all due respect, sir, I'm pretty sure a man like you wouldn't have given up on the woman he loves all because her father warned him to stay away," he says. I chuckle. He's charming; I see why Sino likes him.

"You're right. I would have never given up on my wife, but you are still a kid. You could wake up tomorrow and decide to break things off, leaving my daughter in pieces," I say.

"I'm not saying your daughter and I will be forever, but I believe that it should be her decision for us to break up and not yours," he argues.

I chuckle again. "Even so, you would risk the lives of your family for my daughter? Risk my daughter's life all because you believe it should be her decision to break up with you. Wow, boy, you have balls! I'm a father and a husband; I will stop at nothing to protect those I love. If killing you myself means my

daughter being safe, then so be it!" I declare, getting up from the couch.

"Don't be smart; take the deal, and all will be forgotten. Heck, I can even take you to see her one last time," I offer.

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Dad walks in with Bantu, and I'm shook to the core!

"Dad, Bantu," I say, still in shock, and Mom's just as surprised as I am. This is the same guy I was told to stay away from.

"Hey, Sino. Mrs. Mbanana," he greets, waving at Mom, and she offers a warm smile.

"Hey," is all I manage to utter.

"We'll, uhhm, give you guys space," Mom says, getting up. Bantu walks over and sits where Mom was sitting. They walk out together, leaving us in awkward silence.

"You're not as bad as I thought you'd be," he says with a chuckle, and I giggle.

"Who told you?" I ask.

"Your dad," he chuckles, nodding.

"My father?" I look at him, my eyes about to pop out of their sockets.

"Yep! How are you? Broke anything?" I chuckle.

"Nothing major, babe," I say. He nods and smiles.

"So... uhhm," he says, this time not smiling and looking down.

"I don't know how to do this," he confesses.

"What?" I'm panicking. I don't know what to expect here.

"Sino, I love you. I know I haven't made my intentions clear with you, and telling you that I love you doesn't make them any clearer. But from the very first time I met you up until now, I saw someone I could build a future with, someone I could be stable with... Just the perfect person, if that makes any sense," he expresses, chuckling.

"Sino, I don't know how to do this or how to say this, but we won't work out. I'm leaving Cape Town, changing universities. From here to Free State," he reveals. My heart sinks to the bottom of my stomach, and I can't hold back the tears. It's painful.

"I'm sorry to do this to you, Sinokuhle Mbana. I really do, but I have to leave," he says, kissing my forehead and walking out without waiting for my response. I'm left in tears. Mom walks in

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initially smiling, but her smile disappears when she sees tears rolling down my cheeks.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asks, placing her hand on my cheek, wiping away the tears that won't stop.

"He broke up with me," I say, wailing. She takes off her blazer and shoes, then joins me in bed, pulling me to her chest.

"I don't understand. Things seemed fine. We were fine," I say, wailing on her chest.

"As long as you guys are together, your life is at risk. He did what he did to protect you," Mom explains, brushing my back. I stop and look up at her, confused to the core.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"That his father caused your accident. His father and yours have bad history, and so, for revenge, his father caused your accident," she reveals.

"What did Dad do to his father, Mom?" I ask, because I can't be caught up in a crossfire I don't understand.

"Nothing this time around. More like, what did your grandfather do?" she says, playing with my hand.

"Mom, what else does Dad do?" I ask, looking at her.

"He's a programmer," she says, loosely. I shake my head.

"No! I don't buy that!"

"You don't have to buy it!" says Grandpa's voice, startling both of us.

"How are you?" he asks, walking towards us.

"Hello, my babies," Grandma greets, walking in behind him. She comes and hugs both Mom and me.

"I'm good, Gran. I'm okay and still alive for now," I say as we break the hug.

"I didn't know you guys were back," says Mom, the look on her face tells me something.

"We got on the plane as soon as we heard," says Gramps.

"I should go fetch the kids," Mom says.

"Lwando is on his way there; we bumped into him as we were coming in," explains Grandpa.

"Mh," The room falls into an uneasy silence, and I can sense that there are hidden truths, unanswered questions lingering in the air. My mind races with curiosity and confusion. "Who is my father? Who are these people?" I wonder, unable to contain my growing desire for answers.

LWANDO

Bantu walks out of Sino's room, his demeanor reflecting a profound emotional struggle. His face bears the weight of a difficult decision, and it's clear he's grappling with the pain of parting ways with Ayola. I empathize with him; the prospect of saying goodbye to a loved one is never easy. I reflect on my own commitment to my wife and kids, acknowledging that the sacrifices made for their safety are choices weighed heavily in the balance of love and protection.

"Everything okay?" I ask as Bantu makes his way towards us. He shakes his head no, and Ayola is making a phone call a bit far from us.

"Allow me to drive you home," I offer, and he looks at me.

"Do I have a choice to say no?" he asks, sounding annoyed. I shrug.

"It's really up to you, kid. I have to go and fetch my kids," I say.

"I guess," he says. We walk to the car, and he gets in the passenger seat. Just then, my in-laws come towards me.

"Lwando," Mr. Majola says, shaking my hand.

"Mr. Majola," I say, breaking the handshake.

"Mah," I say.

"Son," she says, pulling me in for a hug.

"How are you? How's my baby?" she asks, breaking the hug.

"She's awake, and it's nothing fatal," I say.

"Ok, that's good to hear," says Ayola's father.

"I'm going to fetch the kids; we'll talk later," I say, and they nod, heading inside while I get in the car. My phone rings, and it's Hlumelo.

"Yes," I say, answering.

"I'm at the airport and the plane," she says.

"I'm with your brother," I add.

She keeps quiet for a while. "How is he?" she asks, sounding like someone about to cry.

"Here, talk to him," I say, handing him the phone.

"Hlumi," he says.

"How do I know if it's really you?" he asks. Moments later, he chuckles. "Ok, I believe you. Why did you leave? Where are you? When are you coming here? Gosh, I don't know what to say," he continues, a bit overwhelmed.

"So I should trust him?" he asks, looking at me. He keeps quiet for a while.

"If you say so," he says.

"I hope to see you soon then," he adds and then hands me the phone.

"Yes!" she breathes out.

"Please, just take care of him," she pleads.

"If he takes my offer, then I can guarantee you that nothing will happen to him. Hlumelo, if Ayola's father finds out it was your father, he will want to get even

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and your little brother won't be so safe," I warn and turn to him. He's looking at me.

"I understand that, Sniper, and I will talk to my father first thing tomorrow," she pleads.

"If anyone of my family gets hurt in any way, I won't spare him," I warn and then end the call. I drive to his home and park in front of the gate, then get off with him.

"Where are you going?" he asks, sounding nervous.

"To talk to your father!" I say and then head in. His mother welcomes him with open arms and eyes me.

"Thandi," I say, but she doesn't respond. Her husband walks in.

"Sniper," he says.

"We need to talk!" I say and point outside. He follows me, and we stand by his car.

"You have some nerve coming to my house," he says, gritting his teeth.

"And you have some nerve messing with my family. Stay away, Bonke! Next time I won't be so forgiving," I say and then walk away.

"You don't know me, Sniper," he threatens. I stop and chuckle.

"Your son seems sweet. I'd hate for anything bad to happen to him. You've already lost one child; don't try to lose another one," I say and head to my car. I start with Thando.

"Hey buddy," I say as he gets in the car.

"Hey dad. What's up?" he asks, throwing his bag in the back.

"Your sister was in an accident," I say, turning to him and starting the car.

"Is she Ok?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah, she's fine buddy. She broke a leg and hit her head," I explain.

"Ok, dad," that's all he manages to utter. I keep quiet; Thando is not one to get emotional and share his feelings. We drive to Saney's school in silence, with nothing but music bumping. I park, and she runs to the car, all excited. I get out and meet her halfway, picking her up and spinning her around. She's one happy child, and I worry that she might just be bipolar or something because her being happy switches up real quick to anger. I put her down.

"How are you, daddy?" she asks with her mother's smile.

"I'm Ok, baby, and how are you?" I ask, opening the door for her.

"I'm all good, dad," she settles in her seat, buckling up.

"Daddy, I don't like it when you shout at Sino," she says, paying no mind to me or whatsoever.

"You need to apologize and make things right with her. She's your daughter and she's human, and humans make mistakes," she says. Thando looks at her and then at me. I shrug.

"I'm sorry, baby. I won't do it again, Ok?" I say, turning to her.

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to her kaloku," she scolds. I chuckle and nod.

"Buy her flowers and sweets like you do mom. She likes roses. Red roses and prefers Lindt. She hates Ferrero!" Thando turns to her.

"How do you know all of this?" he asks with furrowed eyebrows.

"Sino and I talk, Ok!" she says proudly. Who are we to argue?

BANTUBONKE

I've seen Sino around campus multiple times, but every encounter happened while I was still with my ex. I knew that if I approached her, she'd probably ask me about my ex; she seemed like that type.

Bumping into her that day was, by far, the best thing to ever happen to me. I had a crush on her, and it was insane. When she gave me a chance, that crush turned into love, or at least it felt that way.

She's been my peace ever since then. The more we grew closer, the more I started contemplating going to Tokyo. I remember talking to my parents about applying to further my studies here, and it was hell. They were against it, reminding me of how many people lost things to me, and here I am being ungrateful about it. So yeah, that failed!

The news of her accident hit me like a ton of bricks. The mere thought of a world without her presence felt like a cold, desolate void. I couldn't fathom the idea of facing life without the warmth she brought into it.

My mind raced with a montage of memories – the laughter we shared, the comfort of her presence, and the love that connected us. The fear of losing her, even for a moment,

gripped me in a way I never thought possible. She wasn't just a part of my life; she was my life.

Every beat of my heart echoed her name, and the mere notion of her being hurt sent shivers down my spine. I felt a surge of emotions – worry, fear, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness. The vulnerability of human existence revealed itself in that moment, and I was acutely aware of the fragility of the bonds we hold dear.

In that fleeting moment, I realized that life without her wasn't just unbearable; it was inconceivable. The depth of my emotions became painfully clear, and I found myself yearning for her safety and well-being with an intensity that bordered on desperation.

Her father is a scary man. He has this intimidating look that makes you almost pee your pants, and his status in the country doesn't help.

I'm not giving up on us, but for us to work, I need to be in South Africa at all costs, and his deal seems better than the Tokyo one, in all fairness.

Dad walks in, and he seems furious, but so am I.

"Stay away from that man," he warns, heading to the lounge.

"I think the only one I should be staying away from is you," I respond, walking in after him. He turns faster than the speed of lightning.

"What did you just say?" he asks.

"Why would you go after her? You know I love her, dad," I say.

He breathes out slowly. "Her father owes me a daughter," he says with a look I've never seen before. It's cold and is out for blood.

"So it doesn't matter to you that Sino means everything to me?" I ask with furrowed eyebrows. He places a hand on my shoulder.

"Look, son, you're young. You're pretty, you can get any girl you want," I look at his hand and then at him, then remove it.

"Seeing that this is all so important to you than I am. Seeing that you are willing to gamble with my life in order to get revenge, I'm moving to Bathabile's home," I say and then walk out to my room. I call my aunt (mom's sister) and brief her about what's going on before asking to move in, and she's more than supportive. I think it's also because she never liked my father.

I pack a few clothes, mom walks in as I'm packing.

"Bantu Sthandwa sam," she says with a scratchy voice.

"Mom, I can't stay here. He tried to kill her," I say, shoving clothes in my bag.

"So it's Ok for her father to kill our daughter or to sell her to the highest bidder?" she asks, settling on the couch.

"Hlumelo left because of your husband's shady dealings

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mom!" I point out.

"He poisoned you against us. What else did he tell you?" she asks with raised eyebrows.

"Your husband is not the man I thought he was."

I say and then turn back to packing. She starts shouting, going off at me about the whole thing, but I don't respond.

Eventually, she gives up, and soon my aunt is parked outside with Thap's, waiting for me. I drag a suitcase to the car with a small bag in hand.

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SINOKUHLE

The door opens, and my dad walks in, holding a bouquet of vibrant red roses, a luxurious box of Lindt chocolates (my absolute favorite), and a fluffy teddy bear in his hands. The

aroma of the roses fills the room, instantly captivating my senses. He approaches with a warm smile, and the thoughtful gesture is enough to make my heart skip a beat.

As he enters, my little sister Saney, always quick to sense a moment, jumps onto the bed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She hugs me tight, creating a joyful and comforting atmosphere in the room. The combination of the sweet fragrance of roses, the tempting aroma of Lindt chocolate, and the softness of the teddy bear brings a sense of warmth and love that envelops us in this beautiful moment.

"I'm sorry about yesterday and today. It was uncalled for," he says, his eyes showing a rare vulnerability. Apologies from my father are a rarity, but in this moment, sincerity fills the air.

"Thank you, Daddy," I say, opening my arms to him. He hugs me, and for a brief moment, the complexities of our relationship fade away. Thando, my ever-worried brother, takes a seat by my bedside, concern etched across his face.

"You okay?" he asks, reaching for my hand. Despite everything, my siblings seem to find a way to express their feelings more openly with me. It's a unique bond we share, an unspoken understanding that transcends the difficulties in our family.

"Yes, Thando, I'm okay," I assure him, hoping my words bring a sense of reassurance. His concern warms my heart, reminding

me that amidst the chaos, we can find solace in each other's presence.

Thando's concern is heartwarming, and I assure him of my well-being with a smile. He kisses my hand before turning his attention to the rest of the family.

Three days later, I'm discharged from the hospital, and Layla is also on the mend. The emotional turmoil from my recent breakup weighs heavily on me. It's a quiet Sunday, and with the family away at church, I find solace in the company of Nono, casually flipping through channels.

A sudden knock interrupts the tranquility, and Nono rushes to open the door. In walks a new face, a woman who bears a resemblance to Bantu.

"She says her name is Hlumelo Mtwá, and she's here to meet up with your father," Nono announces, casting a curious look my way. The mention of my father's name sparks a mix of emotions, and I brace myself for the unexpected encounter with this unfamiliar visitor.

LWANDO

The tension between my wife and me is palpable, hanging in the air like a heavy cloud. We decide to grab supper on the way home, steering the car past Spur. The atmosphere in the vehicle is thick with unspoken words and unresolved emotions. As we arrive home, the kids retreat to their rooms to change, leaving me alone with my wife and in-laws.

The silence is deafening, each passing moment accentuating the strain in our relationship. I can feel the weight of the unspoken truths and the emotional turmoil that has gripped our family. Unsure of how to break the ice, I glance at my wife, searching for a way to bridge the gap that has emerged between us.

"If this, whatever it is, ever comes close to any of my kids again, I swear to God I will kill you!" my wife declares, her anger cutting through the tense atmosphere, shocking everyone present.

"What are you talking about, honey?" her mother inquires, attempting to make sense of the escalating situation.

"Ask your husband and the man I thought was my husband," Ayola responds, her words carrying a deep sense of betrayal.

"Even after everything that's happened, they're still involved in these shady dealings!" Ayola reveals, unable to contain her anger.

"Keep your voice down! There are kids in the house," her father reprimands.

"All due respect, but you will not yell at my wife in my house," I assert, addressing Ayola's father. He looks at me and chuckles sarcastically, pouring himself water before exiting the room, leaving Ayola and Amanda behind.

"I'll bring the food to the lounge," Amanda says, attempting to ease the tension.

"Mah, can I talk to my wife alone?" I request.

"Just remember that Thando and Saney can walk in any minute now," she warns before leaving the room. Unsure of what to do, I stand there, contemplating how to approach Ayola.

"Majola," I finally say, breaking the heavy silence.

"Rhadebe," she says, her voice sounding drained, carrying the weight of the situation.

"I'll fix this," I say, more like pleading.

"He dumped her. I hope you're happy," she says, then goes to the cupboard, takes out the plates, and begins to dish up.

"I'm not happy, Majola, but as long as she is safe," I say, trying to justify my actions. She chuckles sarcastically.

"Safe? She broke a leg because she was arguing over the phone with you, Lwando! She's lying in that bed because of you! Don't tell me anything about safety!" she exclaims, her frustration evident. She continues dishing up, and I walk out with my tail between my legs.

For the first time in a while, we sleep facing separate sides. The tension is palpable, but we try to hide it from the kids. The strained atmosphere lingers, leaving an unsettling feeling in the air.

"I'll talk to him," she assures after understanding the gravity of the situation.

"You don't understand. I need you to leave the country. Go somewhere safe, away from all of this," I insist, concern etched on my face.

"Mr Mbana, I can't just disappear. I have a life here, people who care about me," she protests.

"People who could be in danger if your father decides to retaliate. I won't let that happen," I say firmly, emphasizing the seriousness of the matter.

She sighs, realizing the severity of the situation. "Okay, where do you want me to go?"

I provide her with a plan, outlining a safe place for her to stay until things settle down. She reluctantly agrees, understanding that it's the only option to ensure her safety and the safety of those around her. I need more than just words to communicate the gravity of the situation to him, to imprint upon him the unwavering strength that defines me.

"I need more than you talking to him, make him understand that I'm not to be messed with," I caution, and she nods in acknowledgment.

"Of course, sir. Now may I?" she asks. We rise from our seats, and as we swing open the door, her father stands on the other side.

"Hlumelo!" he exclaims, clearly taken aback.

"Tata," she replies, and a palpable tension lingers between them. They share a moment, eyes locking in a silent exchange. Then, in an unspoken understanding, they embrace.

"Where have you been? Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" he frets, still holding her tightly. She breaks free from the hug.

"Tata, I'm fine. He convinced me to come back," she reveals, but the shock on his face persists.

"Come in," he utters, inviting us into the realm of their familial turmoil.

As we step inside, I decisively lock the door behind us

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enclosing the room in an atmosphere thick with tension.

"What's going on here, Hlumelo?" her father finally inquires, his voice heavy with anticipation.

"The day I left was the day I unearthed your clandestine dealings. I discovered that Mom's accident, which nearly led to Bantu's demise, was orchestrated by you. I delved into files, watched video footage—every facet of your existence reeked of duplicity. I couldn't bear to stay, knowing the monstrous depths of your ruthlessness. On a seemingly ordinary school day, I prepared, gathering a few essentials to escape. I discarded my phone and anything that could trace me back to you, fleeing to the States, vowing never to return until now, when Mr. Mbanana informed me about your involvement in his daughter's accident," she elucidates, her words hanging in the air, each one a revelation that cuts through the silence.

Throughout her revelation, her father remains eerily quiet, absorbing the weight of her accusations.

"If it's possible, I'd like to visit Bantu and Mom," she requests, her tone carrying a mix of vulnerability and determination.

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SINOKUHLE

"Hlumelo Mtwá?" her father utters in disbelief.

She nods, a silent affirmation to her identity.

"Bantu's sister?" he continues, seeking confirmation.

A smile graces her lips. "Yes," she acknowledges with a mixture of pride and sadness.

I observe her closely, my mind swirling with a plethora of unanswered questions. Her next revelation, however, catches me off guard.

"I ran away from home with a boy and never looked back," she confesses, a shadow of both regret and liberation in her eyes.

"Well, until your father contacted me a few days ago," she adds, offering a polite smile. There's a subtle resemblance in her smile to Bantu's, a connection that momentarily bridges the gap between the past and present.

"How do you know my brother?" she inquires, curiosity etched across her face.

"He's an ex," I admit, my words carrying a weight of complexity, leaving the air charged with unspoken emotions.

"What business do you have with my father?" I question, still grappling with the swirling confusion that envelops this enigmatic encounter.

"Your father is my boss," she declares, her gaze fixed on me without a hint of hesitation. I offer a nod, absorbing this unexpected revelation.

"I should, uhhm, go rest," I interject, grabbing my crutch to rise from my seat.

"It was nice meeting you, Sino. I've heard so much about you," she says, a courteous smile gracing her lips.

"I wish I could say the same about you, but your family believes you to be dead, so..." I trail off, leaving an awkward truth hanging in the air. With that, I make my way to Dad's study, fueled by a determination to unravel the mysteries shrouding this reunion. Today, I'm resolved to pry until I find something, and I have an hour before he returns.

I approach his computer, and the password turns out to be a combination of our years of birth, starting with mine and spanning to Saney's. As I gain access, disappointment washes over me—there's nothing of interest, nothing that unravels the web of secrets I'm entangled in.

I delve deeper into the investigation, scouring his desks until I stumble upon an encrypted laptop. My curiosity piqued, I open

it only to be confronted with a four-digit PIN requirement. A moment of intuition prompts me to try my year of birth, and to my astonishment, I gain access. The screen before me is a mosaic of scrambled bytecode, a digital puzzle shrouded in secrecy. A black backdrop, etched with white characters, confronts me—an intricate fortress guarding whatever lies within.

The level of protection is staggering, a testament to the clandestine nature of the contents. My instincts scream that there's something significant hidden here. Having grown up with a father like mine, hacking into a computer became second nature. It was one of the first skills he imparted to me back in high school. With a hint of nostalgia and determination, I work my magic on the digital labyrinth, and soon, a triumphant message illuminates the screen.

"Welcome, Sniper." the words on the welcoming screen greet me, raising an immediate question: Who is Sniper?

Undeterred, I proceed to open folders on the desktop, revealing a trove of unsettling discoveries. Blueprints of a plane, images capturing the ill-fated aircraft that recently met its demise, and narratives surrounding it flood the screen. Pictures of the cars the plane was transporting, complete with their blueprints, form a cryptic collection.

Confusion and concern intertwine as I grapple with the implications of my father's possession of such detailed and ominous information. What is he doing with these materials, and how is he connected to the tragic events that unfolded? The answers remain elusive, shrouded within the encrypted depths of this digital realm.

I continue my exploration through the labyrinth of folders, each revelation deepening the mystery. The next discovery sends a chill down my spine—an intricate blueprint of the very house we currently reside in. However, it's not the house I know. Additional rooms, clandestine spaces that defy the reality of our home, are meticulously detailed on the print.

Caught in a web of astonishment and bewilderment, I'm so engrossed in the enigma unfolding before me that I startle at the sound of his bold voice, piercing the air.

"What are you doing Sinokuhle?"

What do I say?

He strides into the room, and an unsettling wave of fear begins to grip me.

"Uhhhm," I stammer, my voice betraying the unease that now permeates the air. He raises an eyebrow, silently demanding an explanation.

"I'm listening, Marhadebe," he declares, arms folded, his authoritative demeanor casting shadows of intimidation.

"Dad, what's going on? Who are you? Please don't lie to me," I assert, my tone attempting to conceal the trepidation bubbling within. Deep down, I'm shaken, teetering on the edge of panic.

"You had no right to snoop through my things, Sinokuhle," he admonishes, swiftly closing the laptop screen.

"You will know what I want you to know!" he declares, his voice escalating to a yell. I swallow hard, a lump forming in my throat, as the weight of his words hangs heavy in the tense atmosphere.

"Who is Sniper?" I summon the courage to ask, a question that hangs heavily in the charged air, a mixture of dread and curiosity coloring my voice.

He chuckles, a sound laced with disbelief at my sudden boldness. "You must have hit your head harder than I thought! The less you know, Sinokuhle, the better," he replies, gritting his teeth in frustration. I shake my head, determination etched on my face.

"You either tell me what's going on, or else I pack my things and leave," I declare, my expression unwavering.

"Don't be ridiculous. Where are you going to go? Don't be stupid, Sino," he retorts dismissively.

"If I was able to hack into your laptop, what's to stop me from taking this information to the cops?" I counter, laying my cards on the table with a steely resolve. I'm playing a dangerous game here, a high-stakes gamble in pursuit of the truth. But in the midst of this intricate web of secrets, it seems like the only way to unravel the enigma that has entrapped me.

"So you would risk your whole family's life over this?" he challenges, his question hanging in the air, heavy with implications. I pause, considering the weight of his words. Is he joking? How could I be risking their lives?

"If that information on that laptop lands in the wrong hands, Sino, all our lives would be in danger," he asserts with a cold expression that betrays no emotion. The mystery deepens, and I can't help but wonder who this man truly is.

"When the time is right, you will know everything, but until then, don't go snooping around my things," he warns, closing the laptop with a sudden finality that startles me.

"Your mother and siblings are in the lounge," he announces, a coded directive to leave. I grab my crutch, a physical anchor in this storm of uncertainty, and exit the room, joining the semblance of normalcy in the family space.

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LWANDO

There's no doubt that Sino is mine and Ayola's daughter. This sudden fierceness, the sudden tenacity, the bravery, the unwavering determination to pursue what she believes is right—it's all reflective of the strength and resilience inherent in both my wife and me. I should be mad at her for delving into matters that could be dangerous, but instead, I find myself overwhelmed with pride. It's crazy, right? I'm a proud father.

As Hlumelo takes a seat, the weight of the recent events settles upon the family, each member grappling with their own emotions and the newfound revelations that have unfolded.

"You're not angry?" Hlumelo inquires, seeking her father's reaction. Lwando shakes his head, dispelling any notion of anger.

"I'm proud of her for being this strong, fierce, and tenacious," he declares, the pride evident in his voice, still grappling with the unexpected turn of events.

"You're uhhhm... Weird," Hlumelo remarks, eliciting a chuckle from her father.

Settling into his seat, Lwando turns his attention to the practicalities of the situation. "How did things go?" he asks, curious about the reunion.

Hlumelo responds with a pleased smile, sharing the warmth of the family gathering. "Mom was happy and in disbelief. It felt good to be with them. They told me about how they never stopped looking and kept waiting for me to show up until eventually they gave up. I put them through a lot, but they're still good," she concludes, offering a glimpse into the resilience and forgiveness within the family.

"And your brother?" I inquire, shifting the focus to another crucial aspect of Hlumelo's reunion with her family. However, the smile on her face turns into a frown, and a shadow of sadness eclipses her eyes.

"He's gone. He hates me, he blames me for everything. Says if I hadn't left, then he and your daughter would be together. He believes that the war between you and my father began

because of me," she reveals, her voice carrying the weight of regret.

After a pause, she adds, "Sir, I know this is a lot to ask of you, but there's no guy better for your daughter than my brother." Her plea is accompanied by an earnest gaze, as if searching for understanding.

"This is not any of your business Hlumelo. The two of them are done. He is at a good university, finishing something he loves with a job guaranteed and an opportunity to be mentored by me," I assert, pointing out the stark reality. Hlumelo nods, acknowledging the boundaries of her influence in this intricate family dynamic.

"But, sir—" Hlumelo begins, but I cut her off with a stern command.

"Focus on trying to end this war that won't stop because of you," I assert, emphasizing the urgency of the situation.

Hlumelo attempts to provide additional information. "I know, and we've spoken about it. He said he would talk to his gang only if I join his gang," she discloses. I shakes my head, understanding the gravity of her predicament.

"You do know that the only way out is through death? Hlumelo, you know too much. You can't just jump ship," I explain, my words laden with the harsh reality of the choices she faces.

"I understand that, sir, and so does he, but he's not willing to negotiate," she confesses.

"So what have you decided on?" I probe, recognizing the complexity of the situation that my daughter now finds herself entangled in.

"He said we have until the end of the week to decide," she utters, the weight of the impending deadline evident in her heavy sigh.

"Even if that's the case, he is your father, Hlumelo. Find his weak spot and manipulate it. Use your brother if you have to," I advise, offering a pragmatic solution. She shakes her head in refusal.

"My brother has been put through enough. He will not be a pawn in your game with my father," she declares sternly.

"Use me all you want, but keep Bantu out of it!" she insists. I nod in reassurance.

"Your brother is safe and protected. Just keep your father in check," I assert, rising from my seat.

"You need to leave," I state, making my way to the door. She walks out first, but before she leaves, I issue a final warning.

"Don't get too comfortable. You have a week," I caution, and she responds with a laugh, a fleeting moment of levity in the midst of the tension that surrounds their precarious situation.

"I know," she acknowledges before greeting everyone in the lounge. As I lead her out, Ayola, my wife, gives her the stink eye. I can read my wife like a book.

"Aren't you staying for lunch, Hlumelo?" Ayola questions, her expression sharp.

"No thank you, Mrs. Mbana. My boyfriend is waiting for me at a restaurant," Hlumelo replies, offering a polite smile. Ayola manages a smile in return, and I accompany Hlumelo to her car.

"Your wife scares me," she confesses as she opens her car door.

"I know," I admit, finding humor in her admission. "Bye, Mr. Mbana," she says as she prepares to drive off.

"I sure hope we don't lose you. You're one of the best there is, Hlumelo. I would hate for us to be enemies," I warn, closing the door for her. She drives off, leaving me to head back inside.

"You have some nerve bringing your 'friend' into my house with my parents and kids around," Ayola confronts me, her tone carrying a mix of anger and frustration. I chuckle and hug her from behind, planting a kiss on her neck.

"My only 'hoe,' wife, side chick, or whatever is right in front of me, and my hands are squeezing her boobs," I playfully declare, nibbling on her ear as a mischievous grin plays on my lips.

"One of the kids could walk in, Lwando," she warns, attempting to break free from my playful hold.

"Tell me you love me first," I insist, sliding my hand under her skirt. "Lwando, come on," she protests, attempting to resist.

"Tell me, Majola. I need to hear you say it," I assert, my hand positioned between her thighs. She breathes out, caught in the intensity of the moment.

"Lwando!" she protests again, her breathing becoming heavier.

"Tell me, Majola," I plead, kissing her neck as the struggle continues.

"The kids," she sighs, her resistance holding on.

"Tell me, Ayola," I insist, pressing on, and she finally gives up the fight.

"Ndiyakuthanda, Lwando Sniper Mbana Rhadebe!" she confesses, the words filled with both exasperation and affection.

19

7 Years ago

Fresh out of varsity, I find myself entangled in the intricate dance of love and ambition. By day, I navigate the corporate labyrinth of my father's empire, a fresh graduate working diligently within the confines of familial ties.

Yet, beneath the polished surface, I harbor a clandestine passion, a secret endeavor fueled by the clandestine funds he channels my way each month. It's my clandestine escape, my way of building something uniquely mine, away from the shadow of his legacy.

The ghost of Bantu lingers in the recesses of my past, a love lost and a connection severed. Since he decided to sever the ties that bound us, our paths never crossed again. I, however, refrained from delving into the fragments of his life that drifted further away. The echo of confusion reverberates within me, questioning why he opted for the allure of my father's offer over the intimacy we once shared.

Acceptance is a bitter pill, yet I've swallowed it. My father, a figure of mystery and intrigue, harbors a darker side. The revelation of his low-key criminal pursuits, hidden from the façade of family, unfolded before me. In the solemn gathering

of the three of us – him, Mom, and me – the truth was laid bare.

I could have erupted like a tempest, stormed out in protest, but instead, I chose a stoic acceptance. My father may not be murdering or inflicting harm upon others, and in that twisted moral calculus, I find my solace. Call it peculiar, call it whatever you wish, but he's still my father. I cannot fathom him languishing behind bars, a consequence of my rebellion.

Thus, I tread this delicate tightrope, balancing on the edge of love and loyalty, grappling with the complexities of a life entwined with secrets and sacrifices.

At the tender age of 20, standing on the precipice of adulthood, I bask in the optimism that life has only just begun its promising ascent. The thrill of pursuing my honors degree propels me through a rollercoaster of challenges and triumphs, a journey my parents eagerly anticipate, craving the pride of having an educated daughter.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of a Saturday at the mall, the cold June air in Cape Town wraps around us like a cloak. In the company of Saney, my ever-enthusiastic companion, we weave through the shops, navigating the maze of holiday fervor. As the chill nips at our skin, discussions pivot to plans for Saney's imminent 14th birthday, a milestone deserving of meticulous celebration.

In the backdrop of family dynamics, my 17-year-old brother emerges as a surprising beacon of chivalry. It's a revelation that sometimes even I find hard to believe. However, his journey took an unexpected turn when the shadows of our father's dealings came to light. A fit of rebellion ensued, a tempest of emotions that threatened to unravel the delicate fabric of our familial bonds.

Yet, I, the mediator, managed to coax him back from the edge of dissent. With a pragmatic perspective, I helped him see beyond the immediate turmoil, convincing him that our father's dealings were a separate realm, a parallel universe that need not define or encumber us. In response, he embarked on a journey of his own, packing his belongings and venturing into the world of forensics at Wit's University—a decision that continues to baffle and intrigue.

As I navigate the labyrinth of responsibilities, relationships, and revelations, the cold winds of Cape Town serve as a metaphor for the uncertainties that swirl around me. Yet, with youth as my compass, I march forward, believing fervently that each step is a stride toward a future where promise and possibility await. Life, in all its complexity, unfolds before me, and I embrace the journey with the unwavering belief that it can only get better from here.

Amid the lively ambiance of the Waterfront, my sister and I embark on a whimsical adventure, hopping from store to store, lost in the art of conversation.

"So, spill it. You're telling me you're still a virgin?" My sister's incredulous words pierce through the air, her hands clasping her cheeks in disbelief. In a futile attempt to muffle her exclamation, I swiftly cover her mouth with my hand.

"Could you be any louder?" I glance around, meeting unfriendly stares from nearby patrons. She manages to free herself from my hand, offering an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry. It's just shocking, you know? Graduated and all."

"Yeah, well, I'm no loose cannon," I respond with a nonchalant shrug. Anticipating her interruption, I continue, "After Bantu left

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I decided that the dating scene wasn't my cup of tea."

"You really loved him, huh?" She nudges me gently, and I nod in confirmation.

"Look, you'll find someone better, someone who won't abandon you, no matter what," she assures, brushing my hand with a comforting gesture.

Before I can respond, a bold voice disrupts our conversation from behind. "Uhhm... Hi." Our attention turns towards the newcomer, only to be greeted by a sight that transcends mere attractiveness. His voice resonates, adding an unexpected layer to the sensory overload. My little sister, sensing the shift in my attention, cheekily pinches me, her mischievous grin revealing that she, too, recognizes the magnetic pull of this captivating presence.

"Right, Sino?" my sister prompts, her eyes gleaming mischievously.

"Excuse me?" I respond, clearing my throat, sensing that she's up to something.

"I was saying we can accompany him to his car just to make sure he gets to it safely," she suggests, and I mentally facepalm. Saneey, ever bold, has no reservations.

Choosing to divert the conversation away from potential awkwardness, I decide to engage the newcomer. "So, you're new around here?"

"Uhhm, yeah. I'm from Limpopo, was studying in PE and recently moved here yesterday," he shares, his voice weaving a captivating spell.

"That's, uhh, great. We were born in KZN Durban but relocated here ages back," I chime in, attempting to maintain composure, while Saney lets out a playful chuckle.

"Seeing that you're new and have no friends, how about we become your friends?" Saney offers, and I can't help but pinch her arm discreetly. How could she be so forward?

"I would love that. My name is Lunga Khumbulani Langa," he introduces himself, and in that moment, I realize that this encounter might just be the beginning of a new chapter filled with unexpected twists and turns.

Saney, unable to resist her curiosity, couldn't help but point out, "Your names and surname are Xhosa."

"My mother is Xhosa, and my father is Venda. They never got married, and he never gave me a name, so," he explains, and we both nod in understanding.

"I'm sorry for asking," Saney humbly apologizes.

"Nah, it's okay. I get it a lot, actually," he responds with a nonchalant ease.

"This is my car," he adds, gesturing towards a sleek black Lexus. The revelation leaves us momentarily stunned. Who is this man?

"Thank you for accompanying me here," he expresses, offering a warm, friendly smile.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Saney blurts out, "What are you?!" I quickly intervene, smacking her arm.

"I'm sorry she asked," I apologize on her behalf.

He chuckles at my apology. "It's okay. I am a psychologist," he reveals, and Saney's face lights up with a wide, all-teeth-out smile.

"Hand me your phone," she commands, and as the exchange unfolds, I can't help but wonder how this chance meeting might alter the course of our lives.

"Why?" I inquire, intrigued, as he hands her the phone. Saney, with a mischievous glint in her eyes, starts punching in information.

"Her name is Sinokuhle Mbana, and I'm Sanele. I saved her number as 'Sino Mbana,'" she announces, handing the phone back to him. I can't help but marvel at the sudden turn of events. What just happened? It seems that in the blink of an eye, our lunch outing has transformed into an unexpected rendezvous, and the threads of fate are weaving a narrative none of us anticipated.

Saney can be a real pain in the ass! Who said I wanted a man? You'd think that after three years, I'd be over Bantu, but nope. Not over him. As I glance at Lunga, I see a decent guy, but in my mind, I'm out here foolishly comparing his looks to those of Bantu. Yes, I don't know him yet, but there's this underlying fear. What if I give him a shot, and I end up liking him more than I did Bantu? The prospect of opening up to someone new, risking vulnerability, and the possibility of developing deeper feelings is both thrilling and terrifying. It's a delicate dance between the echoes of the past and the potential of an uncertain future.

"So, Saney got you a boyfriend," says Mom, startling me as she walks into the lounge.

"No! He's cute, but I'm not about that life," I reply, attempting to divert my focus back to the TV.

"Sino," she says, settling beside me. Here comes the lecture.

"It's been three years now. If he was coming back, I'd like to believe that he would have made contact. I get it, your father gave him no choice, but I believe that if he really loved you like he said he did, then he would have told your father to go screw himself," she advises, her words carrying a mix of concern and wisdom.

I exhale, caught in the swirling currents of conflicting emotions. The wounds of the past seem to echo louder in the silence, and I grapple with the challenge of moving forward while still tethered to the specter of Bantu's absence.

"Why should I when I have you?" Dad's voice startles us. Laughter ensues, a familiar banter with our cheeky patriarch.

"Dad, please! Child ears!" I interject, feigning disapproval.

"Where?" he says, pretending to search around, eliciting more laughter.

"So, how was lunch with Saney? Layla came by," Dad mentions, settling on the double couch opposite us.

"Lunch was interesting. Your daughter never ceases to amaze me. I'll call Layla later," I respond.

"What did my baby do this time?" he asks, chuckling.

"Tried setting me up with some guy again," I say, rolling my eyes.

"That's the how many-th guy now?" Mom adds, trying to recall the history of these impromptu matchmaking attempts. The air is filled with a lightheartedness that momentarily eases the weight of unspoken concerns.

"Tenth and counting," I reveal with a sigh. My sister signed me up on a dating site, unbeknownst to me, and I only discovered

it a few months back from a well-meaning colleague. I promptly told her to delete my profile, but not before she had been monitoring it and giving out my number to certain guys. I drew the line at number 9 and told him to forget it – he was too sexist for my taste!

My parents burst into laughter. "So, you've been on 9 dates and still no shag or boyfriend at least?" my father teases, and I retaliate by throwing a pillow at him.

"Wow, Dad! Real nice! Whatever!" I exclaim, rolling my eyes.

"I'm just saying that when your mom was your age... Damn, the things she did," he chuckles, and my mom joins in the laughter. My parents are truly dysfunctional.

Feeling a need to escape the conversation, I get up and dial Layla's number. "Hey baby," I say, seeking solace in the familiarity of a friend who understands the intricate dance of relationships and the chaos of my unconventional family.

"Hi Sino," Layla's sleepy voice greets me.

"Dad tells me you came over. Are you home?" I inquire.

"Yeah, I'm home, babe."

"Okay, I'm on my way," I say before cutting the call.

Announcing my departure to my family, I head to Layla's place.

After knocking, I let myself in and find her in her room, face down and seemingly lost in her thoughts.

"Hey, honey," I say, closing the door behind me.

"Hey, babe," she replies, still avoiding eye contact. I sit on the bed, placing my hand on her back.

"Babe, talk to me. What's going on?" I ask, concern evident in my voice. Layla begins to snifle

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and I feel a sense of helplessness. Unsure of how to handle the situation, I lay down next to her, placing my arm over her shoulders.

"Lay, talk to me, please," I plead, wanting to offer comfort in whatever way she needs.

"I'm pregnant," Layla confesses, and I gasp in shock. Layla and Thaps are—or were, last I checked—still dating, and their relationship seemed serious. The implications race through my mind. Fingers, tongue, a sex toy... none of those should make you pregnant. At least, that's what I thought, unless Layla cheated.

"How?" is the best response I can come up with, my mind struggling to comprehend the revelation.

"I cheated. It was one reckless night, Sino. A one-night stand, and it meant nothing," she confesses, her voice tinged with regret and sorrow. I can't hide my shock.

"Thaps and I were going through a rough patch with her accepting a job in the Eastern Cape. I was out with my colleague, and one thing led to another," she explains in between sobs. The situation is more complex than I could have imagined. Thaps left last month, and while they were making it work, they were still visiting each other almost every weekend. I can't make sense of it.

"So what now?" I ask, a profound sense of confusion and concern clouding my thoughts. I don't know what to say or how to navigate this unexpected turn of events.

"I can't keep it, Sino. Thaps will never forgive me," Layla admits, sitting up with puffy eyes and flushed cheeks.

"I hate myself for this," she continues, burying her face in her hands. I pull her close, offering a comforting embrace, allowing her to release the emotions that weigh heavy on her. After what feels like an eternity, she breaks away from my arms.

"Please tell me you support my decision. I can't lose Bathabile over this. I love her, Sino. She means everything to me," Layla implores, clasping my hands tightly.

"Layla, I love you. I love you so, so much, but I cannot support this. What if something happens to you?" I express my concern, my own fears for her well-being surfacing.

"We will go to a private hospital. At least they will know what they are doing and will care for me as needed. Please, Sino," she pleads, her desperation evident. I find it hard to resist those pleading eyes and her red nose.

Her phone rings, and it's Bathabile calling. We exchange a look.

"I've been avoiding her calls all day," Layla confesses, and I can see the weight of the situation bearing down on her. The complexity of emotions in the room is palpable, and the road ahead is uncertain.

"Layla!" I scold as she hesitates about answering Bathabile's call.

"No, she'll know," she says, shaking her head. I release her and decide to answer it myself.

"Bathabile," I greet.

"You don't get to call me that, wena," she retorts, and I chuckle.

"Long time, what's up?" I ask, trying to play it cool.

"Nothing. Where's Layla? Is she okay?" she inquires.

I glance at Layla, and she signals with a shake of her head indicating that she's not okay.

"She's coming down with the flu. It's bad," I respond.

"Come open the door for me; I'm outside," she says, catching both Layla and me off guard. I shrug at Layla, silently questioning her with my eyes.

"I'll be there in a minute," I say, ending the call. The unexpected arrival of Bathabile adds a new layer of complexity to an already tumultuous situation. I turn to Layla, uncertain of what awaits us as we open the door to face the reality we've been trying to avoid.

"Awesome," I respond, ending the call.

"Sino!" Layla exclaims, annoyed.

"This is your chance to talk. Go get yourself cleaned up," I suggest, recognizing the opportunity for Layla to have an open and honest conversation with Bathabile. Leaving Layla to gather herself, I head out, leaving the two of them to navigate the delicate situation that has unfolded.

I step out to meet her halfway, and to my surprise, you won't believe who is sitting in the passenger seat – the one that got away. The person who shattered my heart into a million pieces. I was never prepared for this, and the rush of emotions leaves me speechless. Our eyes lock, a silent exchange of memories, and he opens the car door. Thaps walks past me, offering a greeting, but my attention is captivated by this irresistible presence strolling towards me.

"Sino." He says, walking towards me, and it's as if everything shifts into slow motion. A surge of emotions begins to boil within me, and without thinking, I turn around and run towards the house. But before I can make it up the stairs, he grabs my arm, halting me in my tracks.

"Sino, please, can we talk?" he pleads, his voice carrying a mixture of regret and urgency. I turn and slap him. The sharp sound reverberates through the air, fueled by the years of unanswered questions and unresolved emotions. One slap turns into many, a torrent of frustration unleashed, and soon, he's hugging me tightly as I start to sob. He keeps repeating the words "I'm sorry." Why did he have to show up now of all times? I don't need this! I pull away from his chest and run up the stairs to the closest spare room.

Layla's parents are away for the month on some business trip. I close the door and stand by it, trying to process his sudden appearance. His cologne hasn't changed, and he looks ten times hotter than the last time I saw him. "Stop it! You're mad at him!" I scold myself, but I can't help but be affected by how alluring he looks and smells.

"Sino, please, just let me in," he begs, banging on the door.

"No! Leave like you did three years ago, Bantubonke!" I respond, attempting to hold back the tears but failing.

"Sinokuhle, please, could you just let me in?" he pleads, the echoes of the past resurfacing in the intensity of the moment. The emotions are raw, and the walls that once shielded me from the pain now stand as a barrier between the past and the present.

I keep quiet and walk towards the window, needing air. He doesn't stop begging me to open, no matter how many times I tell him to go away. He's just there.

The doorknob turns effortlessly, the sound resonating in the hushed room. As it swings open, I'm greeted by the realization that I neglected to secure the lock, a momentary lapse in my usually cautious demeanor. The scent of his cologne wafts in, an overpowering aroma that wraps around me, almost

suffocating. In the stillness of the room, his presence infiltrates my senses, stirring a tempest of conflicting emotions.

I stand there, the air thick with anticipation, hoping for a breath that eludes me. The intrusion of his being creates a whirlwind within, memories and unfinished conversations swirling around like leaves caught in a storm. Each inhale is tainted with the essence of what once was, and the exhale carries the weight of unspoken words, suspended in the air between us. The room becomes a silent battleground where emotions clash, leaving me breathless in the wake of a past that refuses to stay buried.

"I know I messed up, and what I did is unforgivable, but Sinokuhle, please, can we at least talk so that I can try to make you understand why I left then?" he says, his breath brushing down my neck, his hands lightly grazing my upper arms. God, I don't need this right now. I pray for strength to resist him.

"Please, Rhadie," he pleads, and in that moment, I feel my resolve melting. I want to hate him, but I can't. He turns me around to look at him, and his expression shifts to a frown as he takes in the sight of me. His eyes look teary.

"Marhadebe, I am so sorry for the damage I have caused," he confesses, and the sincerity in his voice cuts through the tumult of emotions, leaving me standing at the crossroads of forgiveness and pain.

In the dimly lit room, his hands cup my face, wiping away any lingering doubts. His touch is both comforting and electrifying, sending shivers down my spine. I find myself unable to meet his gaze, the intensity of his handsome face overwhelming. Our breaths mingle, creating an intimate connection as we share the same air.

His breath, warm and enticing, brushes against my face, making my heart race. Surrendering to the inevitable, I allow him to draw my face closer to his. The kiss is a burst of passion, a torrent of emotions that I can't resist. The sensation is so intense that my body responds in ways I can't control. My innermost desires awaken, and the vibrations between my vagina lips speak volumes of the pleasure coursing through me.

In the midst of conflicting emotions, anger battles with an overwhelming desire for him. Morals, once firmly upheld, now seem like a distant memory, thrown out of the window in the heat of the moment. As the need for air suddenly interrupts our connection, I reluctantly break the kiss.

His hands, having left my face, traverse a journey down to my ass, igniting a trail of anticipation. Simultaneously, I wrap my arms around his neck, feeling a heightened sense of vulnerability and desire. The world around us blurs as he guides me to a chair beneath the window.

Seated on his lap, our lips continue their dance, a fusion of longing and rebellion. Despite the madness of the moment, a sense of clarity prevails in my mind. I push him toward the chair, a silent assertion of control, and as I sit on top of him, our connection deepens. Breaking the kiss momentarily, I lean to close the curtains, a metaphorical veil shrouding our indiscretions.

In this charged atmosphere, I am acutely aware of my actions. Despite the storm of emotions and conflicting thoughts, I am thinking straight—I know what I'm doing, even as the echoes of past trauma linger in the recesses of my mind.

The intoxicating rhythm of our kisses persists, each movement a symphony of desire as I grind against him. His arousal grows with each passing moment, a tangible response to the magnetic connection between us. The air is thick with anticipation as our clothes become casualties strewn across the floor.

In a swift, passionate moment, he lifts me with an effortless strength that speaks volumes about our shared attraction. The transition is seamless as he places me gently on the bed, the softness beneath a stark contrast to the intensity of our encounter. He hovers above me, his presence commanding yet tender.

As he positions himself on top, a fusion of emotions plays out in the depths of his eyes. In that intimate gaze, it's as if he's

delving into the depths of my soul, seeking answers and understanding. The connection between us transcends the physical, and in the silence of the room, it feels right, as if the universe itself has conspired to bring us together.

He studies my eyes with a profound intensity, the unspoken connection weaving a narrative of shared desires and unexplored depths. In that moment, it's not just a physical union but a soulful exploration, a meeting of two beings navigating the intricacies of their connection.

"Are you sure about this?" he asks, his voice a gentle whisper that cuts through the charged atmosphere. In response, I nod, a silent affirmation that carries the weight of my desires and the echoes of our shared passion. The question lingers in the air, but my conviction is unwavering. It's a moment of mutual understanding, where words become secondary to the unspoken agreement between us.

His lips find mine in a hungry kiss, a prelude to the sensual exploration that follows. The journey begins as he trails kisses from my neck, down to the curve of my breasts, each touch eliciting a primal moan from deep within. The realization that we are in a friend's home fades into the background as his focus becomes an irresistible force.

Descending further, he explores the landscape of my body with a fervor that leaves me breathless. His journey takes him to my

navel, then down to the intimate sanctuary of my nookie, where he breathes out in a silent appreciation that resonates through every fiber of my being. It's a divine dance of pleasure

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and I find myself lost in the ecstasy of his touch. The sensations are overwhelming, and involuntary moans escape my lips, a testament to the intensity of the experience.

His devotion to my pleasure is unwavering as he continues, bringing me to the pinnacle of ecstasy. As I reach climax, he rises, his lips finding mine once again. A symphony of emotions plays out as he rubs himself at the entrance of my nookie. The anticipation builds, and I can feel the slickness of his precum.

The moment of penetration arrives, and my nails dig into his back as an instinctual response to the unfamiliar sensation. The pain, sharp and intense, pierces through me, a stark contrast to the pleasure that preceded it. He persists, and my tears flow, not solely from the physical discomfort but from the emotional whirlwind that engulfs me.

His eyes lock onto mine, and in that intense gaze, I see more than physical connection—it's a reflection of shared vulnerability, a moment that transcends the physical act. As he pushes forward, the pain persists, but it's not just physical; it's a blend of pleasure and a profound emotional release. Through

the tears, I realize that it's not only the physicality of the act that affects me, but the depth of connection with him that touches my soul.

"I can stop," he says, his expression a mix of concern and genuine care. In response, I shake my head, a silent assurance that despite the momentary discomfort, I want to continue. The vulnerability in his eyes mirrors my own, creating a shared understanding that goes beyond words. In that moment, the option to halt the intimate dance is presented, but my refusal signifies a deeper desire to navigate the complexities of pleasure and pain with him.

He persists, the initial discomfort gradually giving way to a melding of bodies and shared pleasure. As my walls accommodate all of him, his hands explore, squeezing my breasts in tandem with the rhythmic dance of our bodies. There's a sense of rightness in the air, an unspoken acknowledgment that this is a path we need to tread for closure.

The journey continues, and we seamlessly transition through different positions, each a testament to the shared exploration of desire. In the midst of the physicality, nothing feels amiss; if anything, it feels like a necessary step toward closure. The need for this connection, this release, is palpable, and the act

becomes a poignant expression of shared vulnerability and understanding.

We move together until we both reach the pinnacle of ecstasy, the shared release a cathartic moment in the tapestry of our connection. But the journey doesn't end there; we explore further, shifting to different positions like doggy style and me riding him, guided by the wisdom Layla shared. The intimacy deepens, and with each movement, we groan and call out each other's names in a harmonious symphony of passion.

As the intensity subsides, I disentangle myself and make my way to the bathroom, the realization settling in that this profound encounter has indeed taken place. Seated on the toilet, I contemplate the significance of the moment. In this vulnerable space, he enters, naked, a silent acknowledgment that what transpired goes beyond the physical act—it's a shared journey of healing and understanding.

"Sino," he utters, his voice weaving a spell that tugs at the strings of my emotions. "Please don't, Bantu," I respond, and miraculously, my voice finds its way back to me.

Insistent, he demands our attention. "Sinokuhle, we have to talk." His words hang in the air, heavy with the weight of unresolved emotions.

"This? This changes nothing. You dumped me. You couldn't fight for our love! There is nothing left for us to talk about, Bantu. You can go get dressed and pretend you didn't see me!" My voice raises, fueled by the resurgence of anger, the wounds from the past still raw. The pain he caused me on a hospital bed echoes in my words.

"I had no choice! I had to leave, else your life was in danger, and I could never live with myself knowing that you got hurt because of me," he pleads, kneeling in front of me, hands clasping mine.

"You broke me, Bantu. You have no idea how much damage you caused," I confess through tears, the weight of the past bearing down on me.

His admission is both painful and sincere. "It was never easy for me too, Sino. Leaving was more painful than you know," he confesses, exhaling the burden he carries.

"I messed up. I know, can we please just fix things?" he implores, looking up at me with an earnest gaze. But I shake my head, pulling my hands away.

"We can't. I've moved on," I declare, the words a shield against the vulnerability threatening to resurface.

"You're lying!" he accuses, but I stand firm. "Believe what you want, Bantu," I retort, retreating into the sanctuary of the

shower. Yet, he follows, the boundary between us blurred by the cascading water. In the intimate space, what starts as a simple shower becomes a make-out session, emotions colliding in the silence.

As we emerge, the air heavy with unspoken words, he breaks the silence. "We need to get you the morning after pill," he states, and in that moment, reality hits me like a tidal wave.

The realization hits me like a tidal wave - we had unprotected sex at Layla's home. A wave of irony washes over me, imagining what my mom would think. Just as we step out of the room, Layla and Bathabile emerge from Layla's, their smiles suggesting a reconciliation. I can't help but wonder if Layla shared the news with Bathabile. The contrast between their joy and the unspoken tension between Bantu and me is palpable. It's not all roses; there's an underlying complexity that lingers in the air, a silent acknowledgment of the intricate web we find ourselves entangled in.

"Bantu," Layla greets with a surprised smile, mirroring my own shock. "Hey Lay, I see you're good," he responds, a smirk playing on his lips. Layla, with a knowing look, acknowledges his presence.

"Just as you are, Bantu," she remarks, giving me a glance that adds an extra layer of tension to the air.

"Listen, B, I'm taking Sino out. We'll be back later," he informs his cousin, who nods with a smile. We exchange goodbyes and head to the car. As he starts the engine, his phone rings, and he shoots me a glance before answering.

"Hey," he says, and a voice on the other end speaks, asking when he's coming back and expressing their longing. "I'll be back first Monday morning," he replies, the tension visible in his demeanor. It doesn't surprise me; I half-expected such complications. He's a pretty boy, after all.

"We love you," the voice on the other end adds sweetly.

"I love you too. Bye," he says, ending the call. He turns to me, and I respond with a nonchalant, "Whatever. Just take me to the pharmacy, please," turning my gaze to the outside world. The intricate web of emotions we navigate becomes even more tangled, a silent understanding hanging in the air.

The complexities of emotions and unspoken tensions simmer as we navigate this intricate dance. "WOW! Men are something else," I muse internally, feeling the intensity of his gaze as it seems to burn through my skin at every opportunity. The unspoken dynamics between us create a palpable atmosphere, a silent acknowledgment of the intricate web of emotions that continues to unfold.

"Please, just say something. Anything, Sino," he pleads, his eyes fixed on the road. I respond by turning up the volume, the car playing Nate ft Zola - Friend Zone. I find solace in the music, lost in the rhythm and lyrics.

"Seriously?" he questions, lowering the volume. I chuckle and defiantly turn it up again. As he parks in front of the pharmacy, he breaks the silence, asking, "You coming with?" I look at him and then turn to the other side, leaving my response hanging in the air. In a sudden revelation, it hits me – this situation mirrors how my mom fell pregnant with me. Dad had lied about the morning after pill, administering an antibiotic or something instead. As we both step out of the car and walk into the pharmacy, the weight of the past hangs heavy in the air. The echoes of my own origin story intertwine with the present, creating a poignant moment of realization. As we enter, I can't help but wonder who awaits us inside.

"Sinokuhle," he greets, a wide smile on his face. Unable to resist, I mirror his smile, partly genuine and partly a way to play along and perhaps provoke the wannabe player I'm currently with.

"Lunga, hey," I say, pulling him in for a hug. In the embrace, I whisper, "Play along, please," feeling a sense of mischief.

As we break the hug, Lunga mentions, "We still on for dinner tonight, right?"

I respond with a smile, "Of course, babe. Wouldn't miss it for the world." Seizing the moment, I continue, "Gosh, where are my manners? Babe, meet Bantu, my friend from Bloem. Bantu, meet my boyfriend, Lunga." The word "boyfriend" hangs in the air, and I notice the look Bantu shoots my way, a mix of surprise and something deeper.

"Nice to meet you," Lunga says, extending his hand.

Bantu glances at it and nods. "Sho, bruh. Sino, we're running late," Bantu says, leaving me in a swirl of emotions, the echoes of our complicated past lingering in the air.

"And that?" he asks, laughing, referring to my choice of music.

"Bitter ex. We'll talk over dinner. It's on me, okay? Text me so I have your number," I reply, hugging him. The laughter and tension between us find a temporary pause as we plan to navigate the complexities of our emotions over a meal.

Good God, he smells so good. The scent of Dior envelops me as we share a hug. Who the heck wears Dior at this age? I can't help but wonder, but then again, he's probably a rich kid. We break the hug, exchanging goodbyes. Turning, I find Bantu waiting by the counter, his presence a reminder of the intricate dance of emotions I find myself entangled in.

"Aren't you a little disrespectful," I retort, rolling my eyes at his remark.

"So now you can speak to me. If only your boyfriend knew what we just did a few minutes ago," he snaps, gritting his teeth.

"Just like your baby mama knows about us, right?" I challenge, and he falls into a tense silence.

"So now you choose to keep quiet," I say, folding my arms and confronting the unspoken tension between us.

"We'll talk about this in private," he finally concedes. A pharmacist approaches, handing us the pill and providing instructions on how to take it. As we walk out, I wave at Lunga, who blows me a kiss. Bantu, visibly annoyed, adds an unexpected touch of cuteness to his demeanor.

"I'm transferring this side in a month," he reveals, to which I chuckle.

"So?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

"I'd like for us to pick up where we left off," he suggests, and I can't help but chuckle at the audacity of his proposal amidst the tangled mess of emotions we find ourselves in.

"You're very funny, you know that? There is no way that we left off, Bantu. You ended things, and I'd be an idiot to get back together with you!" I assert, taking the pill as our conversation takes a turn.

"The sex meant nothing," I add, gazing outside. He laughs in response. "Does your boyfriend know you're no longer a virgin? Those moans and scratches on my back contradict your statement right now," he smirks

his cocky smile irritatingly familiar. I want to hate him, but it's complicated.

"Cat got your tongue?" he taunts, starting the car. I remain silent.

"Still like Mugg and Bean?" he probes further, and I offer no response.

"Cool," he concludes, driving us out of the complex. Our destination is the Waterfront, where he takes me to a seafood joint I've grown fond of lately. We secure a table for two, and with surprising courtesy, he opens my chair for me before taking his seat.

"Yes, Ontlametsi is pregnant with my child. I met her when I got there; we lived in the same building. We grew closer, and she made me forget about you. Well, not completely, but you get the point," he begins, his tone betraying a complex mix of emotions. "There was something about her innocence that reminded me of you. Her childish voice, her laugh, the way she wore her hair, and it didn't help that she was also studying fashion. We started screwing, then turned that into a relationship. Now she's six months pregnant with my baby." He says, could me not crying or feeling anything mean anything? I mean, the man I believed to be the love of my life is here telling me he's in a 3-year relationship, expecting his firstborn, and I have no reaction or whatsoever. Is that normal? you wonder, the absence of an emotional response raising questions within yourself. The revelation, instead of triggering an expected surge of emotions, leaves you in a state of eerie calm, a detachment that feels abnormal in the face of such profound information. The complexities of your feelings, or lack thereof, add another layer to the intricate web of emotions surrounding this unexpected encounter.

"Congrats. So where would that leave Ontla if you and I picked up where we left off?" you ask, leaning in on the table. He breathes out, revealing, "Sino, I never stopped loving you. She was there when I felt like giving up."

You chuckle, questioning, "So you want your bread buttered on both sides?" He shrugs in response.

"Focus on your family, Bantu. I'm not a homewrecker, and I won't start because of you. She sounds sweet; don't hurt her as you did me," you assert, getting up and leaving him at the restaurant. It feels empowering to be in control of your moods and feelings.

Requesting a ride, you receive a text from Lunga about the time and place. Arriving at Layla's, you find Bathabile and Layla cuddled up. Asking Thaps about her plans, you throw yourself on the couch.

"So you and Bantu, huh?" Thaps remarks with a smirk.

"What about Bantu and I?" you respond, rolling your eyes.

"Cool, I won't ask. Babe, convince your friend to work things out with my boy," Bathabile suggests.

"Nah, your cousin needs to focus on Ontlametsi and his upcoming kid," you share, shocking them with the news.

"He told you?" Thaps asks.

"She called earlier on our way out," you explain, turning your attention back to the TV.

"I'm sorry, Sino," Thaps apologizes, sounding sincere.

"Nah, I'm okay, Thaps. Three years without any kind of contact, what was I expecting?" you say, rolling your eyes. Bantu walks in and sits next to you.

"Thaps, your mom called. We should get going," he informs, prompting Bathabile to reluctantly stand.

"Babe, I'll see you later?" she asks Layla, who nods.

"Sino, it was good seeing you. Bye, ladies," says Bathabile, kissing her girlfriend and then kissing you on the cheek. She whispers, "He never stopped loving you," before leaving with Thaps. Layla returns, all smiles.

"So how was it?" she asks, joining you on the couch.

"It was painful at first, but that turned into pleasure real quick. He handled my body like his most prized possession," you admit with an unintentional smile.

"You love him," Layla points out.

"Yes, but what he did doesn't change how I feel about him. I thought I'd forgiven and forgotten until I saw him, and then everything he said that day at the hospital came back in floods. I'm still mad at him."

"Same way you're still in love with him," Layla observes, brushing your thigh.

"I take it you didn't tell Thaps," you say, turning to her. She shrugs.

"I couldn't, Sino. She would kill me with her bare hands. I tried, but I couldn't. We were just so happy, and I couldn't ruin that," Layla explains.

"Tomorrow I'm going to do it; please come with me, Sino," she pleads, taking your hand into hers. "I need my friend with me, please."

"Thank you for coming; I didn't think you'd come," he admits nervously.

"Why?" I ask, frowning.

"Because of the guy you were with. I mean, I was just a pawn in your game earlier," he says with a shrug. Despite the tension, I can't help but notice his handsomeness, a sudden appreciation for dark-skinned individuals.

"Firstly, I am so sorry for using you like that. It was wrong of me, and it's not something I normally do," I apologize, and he nods.

"The guy I was with is my ex. He broke up with me three years back because of something my father said to him, so that ship sank. He came back today, thinking he could sweet-talk me into taking him back, but I lied and said I had moved on, which was a lie," I explain, playing with my hands nervously. The way he's looking at me makes me feel like i'm blabbing.

"So, are you over him?" he asks, and you take a moment to think before nodding.

"I can't say I'm completely over him, but I believe that I am forced to give up all hopes of him and I ever being," I admit, and he nods, the conversation hanging in the air with the weight of unspoken emotions.

"I'm sorry for telling you so much on our first date," I express, and he nods.

"So, it's a date?" I question, raising an eyebrow. I suddenly feel a bit awkward.

"Uhhhm," I stammer, and he laughs.

"It's a date then. What do normal people talk about on their first date?" he asks, and I shrug.

"I don't know. What do you do for a living? How old are you? I don't know, just tell me about yourself," I suggest, sipping on my drink.

"Well, I am 25 years old. I've recently graduated for my PhD in psychology. I'm officially a psychologist. Not that I wasn't, but I was promoted to come and head the hospital this side, so I'm excited about that," he shares with a smile, and I can't help but smile too.

"That's amazing, Lunga! Congratulations!" I congratulate, placing my hand over his, but then I withdraw it, apologizing. He reassures me, "It's Ok." He continues, "Anyway, apart from what you already know about me, that's pretty much it for now. What about you?" he asks.

I take a deep breath. "I am 20, recently graduated with a degree in Computer Science and Fashion Design. I work for my father while furthering my studies and trying to get the fashion

thing going on the side. I have a brother and a sister—you met my sister already. My mother is a lawyer, and my father is a Software Developer slash Accounting something... I don't know what, but yeah, that's him. And my best friend and only friend is my neighbor Layla," I share. He nods and sips his drink, the conversation flowing as I navigate the beginnings of what could be something new.

"Congratulations on graduating. So you majored in two different courses?" he asks, and I nod.

"Wow! Smart!" he compliments.

"I try," I respond, not trying to sound cocky.

"My best friend works at the hospital I'm at now; her name is Phila," he shares. I cringe for a minute, wondering why he has a female best friend.

"We grew up together; our mothers are best friends, so they raised us together until we got to university

where she came to study this side, and I went that side," he explains, and I breathe a sigh of relief. At least they're like brother and sister.

"She was supposed to meet me at the mall today, but she bailed on me. Her fiancé's mom fell ill," he continues.

"I'm sorry to hear that. What about your girlfriend or fiancée?" I ask, trying to fish for information.

"She's sitting opposite me," he casually mentions, cutting into his steak. What? I choke on my food.

"Sorry, did I say something out of line?" he asks, and I shake my head, drinking water.

"So, you'll be my girlfriend?" he asks, and I shrug.

"Let's get past today and see," I say, focusing on eating my food.

The date goes amazingly well; he's interesting to know. We get to my home and park outside the gate.

"I had a great time with you," he says.

"Me too. Thank you," I respond, unbuckling my belt. When I turn, he pulls me in for a kiss. I shouldn't, but who am I kidding? His lips are perfect. He breaks it, leaving me breathless.

"I've been wanting to do that since the first time I met you," he confesses. I'm still speechless.

"I'm sorry for overstepping," he says. I just nod and open the door, taking my bag with me. The minute I walk in, Saney is waiting for me in the kitchen.

I head for the fridge and drink water. "So?" she asks all excited. I down a whole 500 ml bottle because, wow! Even Bantu doesn't kiss me like that!

"Sino!" she shouts impatiently.

"He kissed me," I say, going to the sink. She squeals in excitement.

"How was it?" she asks, following behind me.

"This is not a conversation I should be having with my mother's last born," I say, closing the fridge.

"Don't be a bore! So share! How was it?" she asks, pulling me to the counter chairs.

"It was whimsical. I feel like a hoe," I confess, burying my head in my folded arms.

"Why? It was just a kiss," she defends, brushing my hair.

"I slept with Bantu," I confess, and I hear her gasp.

"I thought we hated him and never wanted to see him again," she says.

"I know, and we do, but it just happened, and I enjoyed every minute of it," I say, embarrassed. She laughs at me.

"Great!" I mumble.

"I think you needed closure, unless the sex brought back forgotten feelings," she low key asks.

"Maybe it did, maybe it didn't, but all I know is that he and I are done! He's expecting; the girl is 6 months pregnant," I say.

"Wow," that's all she manages to say. For a change, Saney is speechless.

"Look, you're not a hoe. Let's look at the sex as retirement benefits, Ok? I mean, it had to happen! Now that Bantu is out of the way completely, you can focus on building something with Lunga; he seems genuine," she says, brushing my back. I feel like an idiot confiding in Saney and actually considering what she is saying.

6 YEARS AGO

So, my folks finally got to meet Lunga, and surprisingly, they're head over heels for him—well, at least Mom is, and the entire fam seems to be on the Lunga fan train. But, classic Dad, he's not vibing with Lunga too much. Thinks there's something fishy about him, like he's too flawless for Dad's taste. He keeps hinting that maybe I should've stuck it out with Bantu. Like, seriously, Dad? Newsflash, Bantu is off the market, with a whole fiancée and a cute little mini-me running around. But hey, my old man's got his reservations and won't shy away from letting me know. Can't a girl catch a break, or do I need to start a family survey before bringing a guy home?

So, Layla's got this adorable little munchkin now—a total cutie. The kicker? She and Bathabile called it quits, and man, it hit Layla hard. She was head over heels for her. To make matters worse, she almost lost the little one during the breakup chaos. But here's the silver lining: her baby daddy, this dude we used to roll with back in school, is all about that dad life. So, at least there's some daddy action happening in the kiddo's life. Ups and downs, but hey, that's the rollercoaster of Layla's love life for you.

Lunga and I are marking a year together, and I find myself in a blissful state. Love is definitely in the air, and it's mutual. He's

an incredible person, and my confidence in him is unwavering. Meeting his best friend was a breeze, and now he's about to introduce me to the family. Throughout our time together, I've taken an interest in his work. It might not be my cup of tea, but there's something intriguing about it that I appreciate.

We spent the night at his apartment, and now, as I wake up, he's nowhere to be found. I try calling him, but his phone rings in the room. Classic Lunga! I decide to freshen up, washing my face and brushing my teeth, all the while attempting to reach him. To my surprise, the shower door opens a few minutes into my shower, and there he is, casually strolling in in all his naked glory. I can't help but marvel at how attractive he is—seriously, his sexiness is off the charts. My GOD!

Lunga possesses the following attributes that make him a total heartthrob - his facial features are sculpted to perfection, with a strong jawline that could cut through the clutter of a busy Cape Town street. His eyes, deep and mysterious, hold a certain intensity that can make your heart skip a beat. Thick, expressive eyebrows frame those windows to his soul, adding an extra layer of allure.

And let's talk about his smile—oh, it's the kind that could light up the skyline of Camps Bay. His lips, not too thin, not too full, just right for planting kisses that could make any romantic novel envious.

Now, as for his body, it's a masterpiece. Picture this: the toned physique of a guy who knows his way around the gym but still enjoys a lekker South African braai. Broad shoulders give him that commanding presence, and his chest is sculpted, practically begging to be touched. Lunga is a walking work of art!

"Good morning, mine," he utters, planting a kiss on my lips. I reciprocate before gently pulling away.

"Morning, babe," I reply.

"I had to rush somewhere, didn't want to wake you. You seemed drained," he explains, pulling me closer by the waist.

"It's okay, babe. I really was," I admit, and he responds with a cocky smile that always has an undeniable effect on me. It stirs something deep within, and I can't help but succumb.

"No!" I assert, attempting to sound stern.

"It's our anniversary, and you need breakfast," he insists, giving my ass a teasing squeeze. The simple touch sends shivers down my spine. I stand on my tiptoes, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling him down for a passionate kiss. The taste of his lips is an exquisite sensation I've never experienced before.

He lifts me up, and we share an intense moment against the shower walls. What he's doing to me should be illegal, and I can't even. He continues until I reach the peak of ecstasy, the

bathroom echoing with nothing but my moans. He gently lowers me down to sit on his lap

and despite the slight discomfort from the early hours, I revel in the pleasure. It's my favorite kind of intimacy.

He skillfully moves me up and down on his rigid desire, and just as I'm on the brink, he sets me down and changes the tempo to a fervent encounter from behind. Our moans and groans fill the room, a symphony of shared pleasure. It's an intense, intoxicating experience, an embodiment of life itself. I interrupt him as he's about to climax, going down on him. This isn't the Sino from university; this Sino has embraced a different, more sensual side. A Sino who craves the intimacy only a lover can provide.

I pleasure him until he guides me deep, a signal that he's ready to release. His husky "Fuck, Sino" is all he can manage as he reaches the peak in my mouth. This act is a rarity outside the shower, but the deviation is electrifying. He assists me to my feet, kissing me, squeezing my ass, and playfully nudging me towards his solid, aroused self. We break the kiss and gaze into each other's eyes.

"Marhadebe," he says, smiling and shaking his head.

"Langa lokulunga," I respond.

"I still want to devour you," he confesses.

"I want you to ride my face until you climax," he commands, the desire in his voice sending pleasurable shivers through me.

"What are we waiting for?" I inquire, shutting off the water.

We enter our room, and he takes a seat, gently pulling me onto him as he reclines on his back. I ascend to his face, straddling him, and commence riding him with a fervor that intensifies as pleasure builds within me, culminating in a climax that leaves us breathless. However, we are far from done. I reposition myself to sit upon his arousal, determined to ride him with an unyielding passion. The room echoes with his unrestrained groans, a testament to his ability to elicit ecstasy from me. My rhythm accelerates, and I secure his hands, pinning them to the bed, all while immersing myself in the intensity of the moment.

"Rhadie, I want to touch you," he murmurs, planting kisses on my breasts. I shake my head gently, opting for a deliberate and sensual grind, creating a rhythm that leaves us both entranced. The afterglow of a recent shower bathes us.

"I went to get you this," he says, handing me two pregnancy test boxes.

"For?" I question, raising an eyebrow. It's a rhetorical query.

"Come on, Rhadie wam, just take the test," he pleads, his captivating eyes appealing to me.

"I'm not pregnant," I argue, tossing the tests onto the bed I was preparing to make. As I attempt to leave the room, he catches my arm.

"Please, just take the test and prove me wrong," he implores, his eyes adopting a puppy-dog expression that I find irresistible.

"Fine," I concede, accepting the box from his outstretched hand. Walking towards the bathroom, he follows closely behind. I conduct the test and hand it to him.

"Happy?" I inquire, somewhat annoyed.

"When we know the results, I'll be," he replies, smiling. I stride past him, shedding my gown. His arms envelop me.

"Whatever the test says, I love you," he declares, kissing my hair.

"Fine," I respond before making my way to the closet. Opening my underwear drawer, I discover a blue box adorned with a blue ribbon—a Tiffany box. I turn, calling out to him.

"Babe?" I realize he's standing behind me.

"I've been wracking my brain, trying to think of the perfect way to propose to you. You know me—I can barely decide what I want to eat or when, but I've never been so sure about a person before. I know it's only been a year, but when you

know, you know. I've had this ring for six months now." I cover my mouth.

"Yeah, I know. I thought if I asked you then, you would have said no. But now, I'm taking a leap of faith, hoping you'll say yes to me." His confession is interrupted by his alarm tone going off.

I harbor no doubts about uniting my life with this man. Despite the premature stage of our relationship, he embodies everything I desire and will ever desire. Encountering someone who reciprocates my essence is a rare occurrence. The connection feels apt, undeniably right.

"Yes," I affirm, a smile gracing my lips as I nod.

"You serious?" he questions, his eyes brimming with tears, and I respond with another nod.

He slides the ring onto my finger, a symbolic gesture that ties us together, and then draws me into him. His kiss is so intense, so passionate, that I momentarily lose track of the anticipation surrounding the pregnancy test. The air is charged with desire as I stand there, naked, while he's clad in briefs. His hands find their place on my ass, skillfully squeezing and massaging in a way that elicits a moan from me, mingling with the fervent exchange of our kisses. The world fades away as he breaks the kiss, leaving us entwined in the electric aftermath of our connection.

"Get dressed before I make love to you in this closet," he commands, and who am I to argue? I simply smile and nod, selecting matching black lace underwear. When I turn back,

he's vanished. As I step out, he's holding the pregnancy test in his hand, a smile playing on his lips and a glossy look in his eyes.

"What does it say?" I ask, standing by the closet, a mixture of excitement and fear bubbling within me. Being 21, the timing feels wrong. In my mind, I'm silently hoping for a certain result.

"Marhadebe, we're 16 weeks pregnant," he announces. I swear I must have misheard him. Four months? When? How? I've been diligent with my contraceptive pill, never missing a day. I wake up in bed, and the scent in the room hints at a hospital. I glance around, finding him holding my hand tightly. It's a struggle to catch my breath.

"You fainted," he says, genuine concern in his voice. I wonder how long I was unconscious, not feeling him drive us to the hospital.

"I'm four months pregnant?" I whisper, and he nods, unsure of how to navigate this revelation. I show no emotion, the news leaving me uncertain about my feelings.

"Sin..." he starts, but I interrupt.

"When were you going to tell us our daughter is in the hospital?"

"Dad asks, startling both of us. I'd normally inquire how they found out, but we all know my father; he is a well-connected man.

"Baby, are you okay? What happened?" Mom rushes to me in a panic.

"Other than being four months pregnant, nothing happened, Mom. All I did was faint," I say sarcastically, forgetting my father is in the room. Shit is about to go down.

"What did you just say, Sinokuhle Majola Mbana?" Dad asks rhetorically. I know he heard me, and I don't want to die.

"On the bright side, I'm engaged to my baby daddy," I say, attempting to lighten the mood, but it only makes things worse. Dad throws a punch at Lunga, and I don't know which news triggered it, but Lunga stumbles.

"Dad!"

"Lwando!"

Mom and I shout in unison, but it falls on deaf ears. Mom runs to them, but instead, Dad pulls him out by the hem of his T-shirt. He is pissed! I jump off the bed and follow. Dad hasn't stopped throwing punches at him, mumbling things we can't hear.

"Daddy, stop it!" I try to pull him off, but he's a beast.

"If you kill him, you will never hear from me again," I say. He's holding him by his neck, and his feet are dangling. Dad drops him.

"What did you say?" He turns to me. I'm not phased; I attend to my fiancé, who is trying to catch his breath. Mom shows up with a guard and a doctor.

"Lwando Mbana. Why am I not surprised?" The doctor says, and Dad chuckles.

"Doc, how's my daughter?" Dad asks, and the doctor looks at me. I shrug, helping Lunga up. Dad really messed him up, poor thing.

"Doc, please have a look at my fiancé," I say, guiding him inside the room. Lunga sits down, and the doctor starts observing him.

"Seems like nothing's broken," the doc says.

"I'll give you a prescription letter for the pain meds and everything else. As for you, Miss Mbana, you need to take things easy. It's not going to be an easy ride from hereon," the doc warns, and I just nod.

"Here are your scans; the baby is healthy. Here is a number of a gynecologist who will help you through all of this," he adds. That's all I hear; I'm too busy admiring my baby that I can't even focus on their words.

"And she's not even listening to me," the doctor startles me, and I find myself laughing.

"I'm sorry; you were saying?" I ask.

"It's okay; we get that a lot with new mothers," he says. Dad is not happy at all. The doctor gives me my prescription letter and Lunga's, then walks out, leaving me with my family.

"Congratulations, my baby," Mom says, pulling me into her arms. As long as she is happy, then I'm good.

"Thank you, Mom," I say

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hugging her tightly.

"As long as you will let me be there for you throughout," Mom whispers in my ear. I giggle.

"Of course, Mom," I say, breaking the hug. She's excited and looking at the scan.

"I'm going to be a grandmother," she says excitedly. I laugh at her, and so does Lunga.

"How far along are you? This is great news, baby. And you're engaged too," Mom admires the ring on my finger.

"This happened this morning. I'm four months, Mom," I say.

"Babe," Lunga smiles at me, and Dad really did a number on him.

"Mkmmk," Dad says, annoyed to the core.

"I will meet you in the car, Ayola," he says, then walks out.

"Mrs. Mbana, I am sorry for..." Lunga starts, but Mom cuts him off.

"Look, I got pregnant at 19, gave birth at 20. I wasn't even engaged at least. I'm happy you and Sino are going about this your own way, though you will be required to pay damages and stuff. But other than all that, you guys have my full support," Mom says. I can't help the tears; I'm glad I have Mom's support.

"But, Dad," I start, and she cuts me off.

"Let me worry about your father. Focus on my grandbaby, okay?" she says, brushing my hand, and I just nod. A nurse walks in to nurse Lunga's bruises. When she is done, we drive to the pharmacy. His phone rings, and it's his best friend, Phila.

"Phila, you're on loudspeaker," Lunga says.

"Hey, Sino," she greets, and I giggle.

"Hey, Phila, how are you?" I ask.

"Did you say yes?" she asks with excitement in her voice. Lunga looks at me, and I smile.

"No," I say, and Lunga just laughs.

"You're not funny, Sinokuhle Mbana!" says Phila.

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LUNGA

I am Lunga Khumbulani Langa. I met Sino last year, and I've never once met anyone like her. She's the best thing to ever happen to me since the promotion. Her father never liked me from the first time he met me, and I never understood why. He believes I'm too perfect, and there's no such thing. Trust me, I'm as dumbstruck as you are. I've done nothing but love Sino the best way I know how. She completes me, you know? I've never met someone so loving, so free-spirited yet so shy, ambitious, and is just the definition of perfect. I'm in love with her in a way words can't even describe. I've been trying to prove to her dad just how genuine I am, but he wants nothing to do with me. How do you win such a man over? I've done my own research, and I've come to learn that Lwando Mbanja is not a man to be messed with. He is dangerous. I don't understand how the man is not in prison for the crimes he's committed... But then again, with money and power, you can get away with anything.

We continue talking to Phila until we reach the pharmacy. Sino offers to get the medication, leaving me to call my parents. Mom will love her even more in person; that much I know.

"Mama," I say.

"Lunga baby, how are you? I hope you're not calling to cancel on us," she says with worry in her voice.

"No, Mom, it's nothing like that," I assure.

"We're on our way, we had to stop at the pharmacy first," I say.

"Is everything OK? I hope none of you are sick or something," she says with so much concern.

"I had a run-in with her father's fists, but I'm OK, Mom," I assure.

"What do you mean? Heh, Lunga, the..." I cut her off.

"Mom, see you in a bit. You better be dressed up ke," I say before ending the call. I dial Dad's number, and he tells us we'll meet at the hotel he's staying in; apparently, the food there is nice. Sino comes back and buckles up.

"We need to go and get dressed," she says, giggling. She's in a gown, and I'm wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"Of course, babe, we're going home," I say.

"Honey, I'm sorry about what my father did; he had no right," she says, brushing my hand.

"I understand where he is coming from. I think I'd feel the same way too towards the guy who knocked my babygirl up," I say jokingly, and she laughs, poking me.

"So you knocked me up on purpose?" She asks, side-eyeing me.
I chuckle.

"Maybe."

LUNGA

Ok, so maybe I knocked Sino up on purpose. I don't doubt that she loves me, but I can't help but fear that one day she'll wake up and leave me for Bantu. He's her first love and virgin breaker, after all, so who am I to compete with him? It doesn't help that he is still hung up over her. Last I heard was that he and his baby mama broke up and were living separately. I've done my research on the guy, or rather, I've had someone look into him for me so that I know who I'm competing with.

I'm not crazy, just a little territorial, that's all. We get dressed and head to mom's hotel; she's already waiting in the reception for us.

"Mom," I say, hugging her.

"What happened to your face?" She says, breaking the hug and cupping my face.

"Mom, I'm fine. This is Sinokuhle Mbana. Sino, meet my mother," I introduce.

"Sino, nice to meet you, I'm Anele Langa," Mom says, pulling Sino into a hug.

"Hello, Mah. It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Sino says and breaks the hug. "You're even prettier in person," she compliments.

"Oh, please, child, don't act smart with me. I see you treating my son well," Mom says, nudging Sino, who smiles politely.

"I try, Mah. He's not a difficult person," Sino smiles.

"Keep her, son. They don't make them like this anymore," Mom advises, making Sino chuckle.

"Mom, stop, you're making her shy," I say, kissing the side of Sino's head.

"Let's get going; you don't want to keep the king waiting," Mom says. Sino gives me a look.

"It's nothing," I whisper, and she just nods. We get to the hotel, and I introduce her to Dad, but he does not seem too pleased.

"So, what do you do for a living?" Dad asks, keeping a straight face.

"I'm a systems analyst at my father's company," Sino says nervously. I don't blame her; the guy scares me too.

"What does a systems analyst do?" He asks, leaning in.

"I analyze systems and make sure that they meet all the requirements set by the people who asked our company to

create the system for them without any glitches or whatsoever," she says and then drinks water. A waiter comes to our table, takes our orders, then leaves.

"Sounds interesting. And your parents?" He asks.

"My mother was recently appointed as a judge, and my father owns a couple of companies around the world, from accounting firms to programming firms," she says.

"I think that's enough now, Father; we have had a hectic morning as it is. This morning, I popped the question

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" I say, brushing Sino's hand.

"Oh, honey, that's great. I take it she said yes?" Sino nods with a smile. My poor baby is nervous AF; she's even shaking.

"So, who did you get on the wrong side of?" My father asks. I sigh.

"Sino's father was not psyched that I got his daughter pregnant," I say with a shrug.

"Who did you say your parents were again?" He asks, turning to Sino.

"Lwando and Ayola Mbana," she says.

"Sniper is your father? Wow!" He says, sounding impressed.

"Sniper?" Sino asks, confused.

"It's a nickname people used to call him," Dad says.

"Wow, son," he says, patting my back. I don't know how to feel about that, really. It sounds as though it's accompanied by something.

My father is the chief, and he's also into a few illegal activities. A man like him has enemies everywhere, which is also one of the reasons I don't use his surname, among other reasons. The man has all kinds of money, but I guess greed got the best of him, hence the illegal things. I found out because he once tried to recruit me, but I couldn't throw away my life and freedom like that. I love my job; I enjoy working with those kids at the hospital. I'm a child psychologist.

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SINOKUHLE

I had to act surprised; the less this man knows, the better. His family is better off not knowing about Sniper. Lunga thinks I don't know his father is a chief. Why would I date someone I didn't do a background check on? With a father like mine, you're bound to be paranoid. His father and mine once worked on a project together back in the days. I saw it in Dad's hidden files. Yeah, I snoop. It's a thing.

After the dinner, I ask him to drive me home (my parents' house).

"So you're saying we should just let it be?" Dad questions, not convinced.

"I'm saying Sino is a grown woman who can make her own decisions. She loves Lunga, and he seems genuine. We should support her and be there for her during this time," Mom tries to reason with him.

"You always defend her. Is it because she's your favorite?" Dad says with a hint of annoyance.

"I love all my children equally, and you know that. But right now, Sino needs our support more than ever. We can't change what has happened, but we can choose how we handle it as a family," Mom insists, and I can see the frustration in her eyes.

Dad takes a deep breath and looks at me. "You're sure about this, Sinokuhle?"

I nod, determined. "I am. I love Lunga, and we'll figure things out together," I say, holding my ground.

Dad looks at Mom, seemingly still not entirely pleased but realizing the importance of unity at this moment. "Fine. We'll discuss this as a family and decide how to move forward. But remember, you're not just responsible for yourself now. There's a life growing inside you, and we need to consider what's best

for the child," Dad concludes, and Mom gives me a reassuring pat on the back.

"Thank you, Dad," I say, hoping that, in time, he'll come to accept this new chapter in our lives.

"Kitten what happened in our day happened. You too chilled," He says, but mom cuts him off.

"And you are too uptight. We didn't make our mistakes for our kids; we made them so they would learn from them. Sino, we are here for you when you need us, Ok? Your father is just scared; he feels like he's losing his daughter to another man. A stranger even. It's normal," Mom says, brushing dad's hand.

"I guess you're right."

In the intimate cocoon of my room, my mother's soft knocks on the door beckon with a subtle allure. As she enters, the hinges release a languid sigh, hinting at the warmth shared between us, a connection beyond the tangible. Her presence envelops me in a silk caress.

"Movie?" she asks, that captivating smile gracing her lips. Who am I to refuse? I nod like an eager child. "Yes!"

She joins me on the bed under the covers, armed with popcorn and a packet of sweets. "How are you with everything?" she inquires, and I lean against her shoulder.

"I don't know how to feel; it's all too overwhelming and happening at once. I'm not having doubts about marrying Lunga, but the pregnancy—I'm just not ready for it," I confess.

She breathes out, a calming presence. "Look, the baby is here now, and there's nothing we can do about it except to take it easy for the next couple of months and just enjoy the ride. Sino, you are my miracle. Before you, I was diagnosed with womb cancer, but here I am today with three beautiful babies and the world's best husband... though sometimes I wish I could kill him." We both share a laugh.

"My parents were absent in my life; I was practically raised by matrons and housekeepers. I guess that's why I'm this chilled. I

didn't want you guys to grow up the way I did; it wasn't nice. With my father as strict as he was... My God, I feared that man; you would have sworn he wasn't my father. I prayed to never be the kind of parent that my kids feared," she reflects, kissing my head.

"I love you guys, and maybe my parenting style is unusual, but I have no regrets because you all know where my door is when you need a friend," she says, prompting me to wipe away a stray tear.

"There's nothing wrong with your parenting. As much as we're not scared of you, we do respect you, and that's all that matters. And you're right; if you weren't this chilled, we wouldn't be able to come to you about anything. So thank you, Mom, for everything," I express, pulling her into a grateful hug, which she warmly returns. We break the embrace and settle back into our positions.

"Are you sure about Lunga? Your father told me that he was too clean for his liking," she asks, and I let out a sigh, contemplating my response.

"Yes, I'm sure, Mom. His father is an old friend of Dad's," I assure her.

"Who is his father?" she asks, surprise evident in her tone.

"A chief in Limpopo, Mr. Mulalo Alfred Vhango," I reveal. She takes a moment to process this information.

"You're sure he worked with your father?" she questions.

I nod. "I saw his file in Dad's computer a while back," I admit. She contemplates this for a moment.

"Oh. Does your father know? The last thing we need is a repeat of three years ago," she expresses concern.

"I don't think he does. Lunga doesn't even know that I know his father is a chief," I confess.

"Why would he hide such detail about him from you? I don't understand," she says, sounding confused.

"I don't know, maybe he's not ready to let me in on that part of his life," I reply with a shrug.

"Yah, but Sino, he can't be hiding such if he wants to make you his wife," she half scolds.

"Yah, but I'm keeping Dad's criminal activities a secret."

"That's different, and you know it. If those details about your father landed on the wrong ears, hell would break loose; people would die, Sino! Marry your guy, but don't marry off your family's secrets to him," Mom advises sternly. I simply nod in acknowledgment.

"If he can hide such about himself, makes you wonder what else he's hiding," she remarks, then shifts her attention back to the movie.

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BANTUBONKE

Ontla and I were destined for an inevitable downfall; we let ourselves get carried away, and now it's all come to an end. The one I love is in Cape Town, basking in happiness with another man, and I can't help but wonder if it could have been different if only I hadn't left. Ontla found solace in the arms of her ex, seamlessly picking up where they left off. As for me, my focus is solely on my son

Advertisement

Lerato Bikokuhle Mtwá.

My phone rings, and you won't believe who is calling me. Theee Lwando "Sniper" Mbana! Despite what happened, I decide to answer because I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for him.

"Mr. Mbana, this is a surprise," I express, noting that he usually only calls the office.

"How are you?" he booms with so much power in his voice that it's almost intimidating.

"I'm good, sir. And how are you?" I reply, keeping a composed tone.

"Good!" he declares, and then there's a brief silence. Unsure of what else to say, I finally break the awkward pause, "If you don't mind me asking, what's this about?"

"I'm flying to Bloem in an hour or so. Let's meet up for coffee," he suggests, leaving me in disbelief.

"Uuhm, okay, sir," I say, still processing the unexpected turn of events.

"Good. Bye," he says, abruptly ending the call. I wonder what's going on as I drive to work on a Monday morning, listening to Sino's kind of music. I'll never stop loving her.

Later, her father calls me on his way to the company, informing me that he landed, and we'll have coffee in my office. I continue working until there's a knock on the door.

"Come in," I say, eyes focused on my computer screen.

"Mtwá," says that intimidating voice, making its way towards my desk.

"Mr. Mbana," I greet, getting up off my chair to meet him halfway.

"How are you?" I ask, shaking his hand, noting that his grip is as firm as his commanding voice.

"I'm well. How are you?" he inquires as we sit down on the couch.

"I'm good, thank you. To what do I owe this visit?" I inquire, shooting straight, knowing that he and I are far from being friends.

"Sino got engaged yesterday, and she also found out she's four months pregnant with this guy's child," he reveals, using a term that makes it clear he doesn't hold the man in high regard.

"Well, I guess congratulations are in order," I reply sarcastically. The news of Sino marrying him doesn't sit well with me.

"I don't trust the guy. Nobody can be that clean! It's impossible," he asserts, his concern evident.

"Maybe it is."

"If you love my daughter, you will find a way to win her back," he urges, and I can't help but chuckle.

"Doesn't this feel like *déjà vu*? We were in your office, and you told me that if I really loved your daughter, then I'd pack up and leave," I remind him, asserting my independence.

"I now realize my mistake. Had you stayed, my daughter would have died! You have a daughter; try and understand where I'm

coming from," he pleads, and after a moment's thought, I see his perspective. I might have acted similarly, but not in the way he went about it.

"Look, I am sorry for the way I went about the situation. It was wrong of me. Please forgive me," he says, the difficulty apparent in his tone. It's clear he's not accustomed to apologizing.

"I forgave you ages ago, but I can't always be your puppet. If Sino wants me back in her life, she'll say so," I assert, making my stance clear. He nods in understanding.

"Okay. Thank you for meeting me. Listen, I'm transferring you to the Eastern Cape to head up a division in my company. You have a month to decide on whether or not you'll take it," he informs me, getting up.

*3 YEARS AGO***LWANDO**

Sino went ahead and married him, a decision I reluctantly accepted. It's a calculated move on my part, a strategic play to keep a close eye on him. If he thinks I've embraced his presence, maybe, just maybe, he'll loosen his defenses. That's precisely what I'm after—his guard dropping.

Their little one arrived prematurely at eight months, a fragile start, but she's now a healthy beacon of joy. The best thing that ever happened to our twisted family. My love for her runs deep, even if my feelings towards her father are tangled in a web of deceit.

Come October, she'll be turning three—Siphiwokuhle Mihlalikazi Langa. A captivating beauty, initially reserved, yet once she warms up to you, you'll find yourself yearning for her attention. Sino has done a commendable job raising her, molding her into a reflection of strength amidst the chaos.

I might not boast about being the perfect father, but my family's well-being always occupies the forefront of my thoughts. Love for them courses through my veins, compelling me to do whatever it takes to ensure their safety and happiness.

My attempts to manipulate situations, to find cracks in his facade, have proven futile. Lunga remains elusive, excelling as a psychologist in the hospital he claims to have worked in. His impeccable facade has earned him a promotion, and he guards his secrets with the utmost diligence. Yet, I sense vulnerabilities, waiting for that one slip, that single misstep to unravel his carefully constructed world.

After years of relentless pursuit, today marks a breakthrough. I've finally tracked down one of his exes, a three-year connection now residing in PE. We're meeting for lunch, and Ayola, engrossed in her caseload, remains oblivious to my covert endeavors. The pieces are slowly falling into place, and I'm determined to expose the truth.

"Mr. Mbana?" A cute, decent voice interrupts my thoughts. I look up from my phone and nod.

"Yes, Miss Young?" I respond.

She nods and settles into the chair. I suggest ordering something, and she opts for a drink. I signal a waiter to take our orders, and once they leave, I'm left alone with Mikayla Miliswa Young—a colored woman.

"You said you wanted to talk about Khumbulani?" she inquires. I nod.

"Yes, actually, I do. My daughter married him three years back, and they seem happily married, but I can't seem to shake off his perfection," I express. She chuckles, looking at me.

"Lunga Khumbulani has always been one to fool people. Your daughter is not safe," she warns. I frown.

"How so?"

"Mr. Mbana, I dated the man for three years and ended up in a psych ward for three whole years. Your daughter needs to leave before she finds herself in a situation she won't be able to get out of."

Our drinks arrive, and the waiter leaves. I take a sip of my drink before asking, "Why were you admitted?"

"For drug addiction, mental disturbance... All things that I am not and have never been. I found out things about him he wanted to keep hidden. I tried to report him at the hospital, but the proof I had disappeared, and suddenly I was a drug addict making things up," she reveals angrily.

"What did you find out about him?" Curiosity overtakes me.

"Khumbulani seeks pleasure from kids!" she declares, and I'm shaken.

"You mean he's a pedophile?" I ask, still processing the revelation. She nods, confirming my worst fears.

"I should have seen it coming. The signs were there, this one time he was at work and my laptop had gone for fixing. I found his hidden in his home office, the minute it opened what I saw on the screen was disgusting! He had been watching a video of a child forced to strip and pleasure herself on camera" I look at her unable to contain my shock

"I minimised the video and found that there was a whole folder. Some of the videos contained men raping kids and just a whole lot more I couldn't stomach. I confronted him and he calmly told me it was research he was working on. I believed him. I mean he works with damaged kids after all" We are disturbed by a waiter placing food in front of us, we thank them and they leave.

"You know when you feel like something is off with your partner?" she says, and I nod, recognizing that uneasy sensation.

"There was a change in behavior after finding those videos, but I was blinded by love, gifts, and money. I didn't see what was going on right under my nose. My sister was 9, and he suggested that we have her checked out by him because kids her age weren't supposed to be a certain way or something. We believed him and had her checked out. When my sister came back, she was more shy than before, withdrawn, and just not herself. We tried getting her to at least talk to Khumbulani,

and they talked. The more they 'talked,' the more she changed," she explains, wiping a tear at the corner of her eye.

She wipes a tear at the corner of her eye.

"A few days later, I walked in on her wrists slit with a note saying 'he's not who he says he is.' I confronted him about it, and he blamed my confrontation on grief. I still didn't leave him. I loved him. One day, he was working late

and I decided to go surprise him but instead I got a surprise of my own. I walked past a room of one of the kids that were rape victims and saw him. He was sitting on a chair watching her strip naked. She had bruises on her body, she was crying. She was only 13 an.." She lets out a delicate hitch in her breath, a fragile melody of sorrow that fills the air. As I hand her a tissue, her fingers graze mine, and I sense the tremor coursing through her. In the dim light, her eyes shimmer with unshed tears, and I find myself caught in the storm of her emotions.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, the words carrying the weight of a thousand untold stories.

I reach out, my touch a balm on the wounds of her soul. "It's Ok," I murmur, the softness of my voice echoing with understanding. I feel the heat of her pain, and my fingers delicately brush against hers, a silent promise to share the burden of her anguish.

"He saw me and pulled his pants up calmly and followed after me. I opened my car door but he closed it. Told me if I told anyone about what I saw then he would come after me and he did. I lost everything!" She says through her gritted teeth, a suppressed symphony of frustration and anguish escaping in strained notes. The words carry a sharp edge, a testament to the inner turmoil she battles with. Her lips, pressed together in a determined line, reveal the silent struggle beneath the surface.

"Your daughter's safety hangs by a thread. That man embodies the devil himself," she declares, and all I can manage is a solemn nod.

"If I were to disclose all this to my daughter personally, she'd never fathom the truth," I express, the mere contemplation of my precious girl succumbing to such a fate causing me profound anguish. The proximity between him and Saney is uncomfortably close, sparking unsettling thoughts about whether he has inflicted any harm upon her.

"I could reach out to her, issue a warning about him," she proposes.

"As long as my name remains unspoken," I reply.

I step onto a flight back to Cape Town. It's already late, and as I return, my wife is back from work. Saney resides with us, and

her brother works in the same city but owns a flat in town. Entering our room, I find Ayola in the process of undressing. Approaching her, I wrap my arms around her from behind.

"Kitten," I whisper, planting a kiss on her neck.

"If you're going to cheat, at least respect me enough to change clothes before you come home," she remarks, removing my hands and heading towards the shower, completely naked. I follow her inside.

"What?" I question.

"She's pretty, young enough to be your daughter," she says, turning on the tap. Everything is in my pockets—phone and wallet.

"Majola!" I yell, taking my suit off and placing it outside the shower.

"Yell at your side dish and not me," she calmly responds as the water runs down her naked body. Once I'm done undressing, I join her.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I claim, touching her shoulders.

"Mikayla Young. She's pretty," she says with envy. I chuckle, pinning her against the wall and holding her hands above her head.

"Lwando, man!" she argues.

"I've had a long day, and all I want to do is be buried deep inside of you," I say, kissing her neck.

"Go be buried inside of Mikayla," she retorts, attempting to fight me off. My hand rubs her intimately; I know her buttons all too well.

"I'm going to let your hands go. Don't fight me on this, kitten," I say, looking deep into her eyes while inserting a finger. She flinches.

"Are we clear, Majola?" I ask, fingering her. She nods. I know her; she's enjoying this, but as soon as I release her hands, she'll slap me.

"Talk to me, kitten," I say, breathing down on her with my thumb going in circles on her clit.

"Yes, Lwando," she says with difficulty. I release her hands, and true to expectation, she slaps me. I chuckle, going down on her, putting her leg over my shoulder, and starting to pleasure her.

Mihlalikazi is, without a doubt, the best thing that has ever graced my life. My baby is a delightful and lovely presence. Lunga Khumbulani Langa is an extraordinary person, and life with him has been an exhilarating joy ride. The love he showers upon me is unparalleled, unlike anything I've experienced before. He is a heavenly gift, always by my side. It doesn't matter the time, place, or weather; he is simply there. Lunga proves to be the best father one could ever ask for. The bond he shares with Mihlalikazi is so strong that I occasionally find myself envious of their relationship. As the week progresses, Lunga is on his way to see me for lunch, providing a welcome break from the demands of work that have me tightly in their grasp.

A knock echoes through my room.

"Come in," I say, my eyes fixed on the screen.

"Sinokuhle." I look up, and it's my father. Either I'm in trouble, or he has something important to tell me.

"Daddy, hi," I say, getting up, but he gestures for me to sit.

"How are you, Sino?" he asks, taking a seat opposite me.

"I'm okay, Daddy, thank you. And how are you?" I inquire.

He nods. "I'm okay. Sino, you know I love you, right? You know the lengths I would go through to protect you, even if it means you hating me."

His words leave me confused. Why is he getting all emotional on me?

"Dad, is everything okay?" I ask, searching for clarity.

"Your husband is a pedophile," he declares. I burst into laughter, unable to comprehend the gravity of his statement.

"Nice one, Dad," I say, still laughing.

"Sinokuhle, I am serious! He is a sick monster who preys on young innocent children for his satisfaction," he asserts with gravity.

I chuckle in disbelief. "All Lunga has ever done is love me, treat me right, be the best he can ever be. Yeah, sure, he's not perfect, but he is not a pedophile. He is a child psychologist, Dad! He loves kids. I don't even know why I bother with you."

"Sino, listen to me, dammit!" he shouts, startling me.

"No, Dad! I thought you'd come around, but clearly, I was wrong. I was an idiot! Please just leave," I say, getting up and walking to the door.

"Seemingly, this guy has got you wrapped around his finger," he remarks, taking out his phone and grabbing a pen from my desk.

"Call her!" he demands, then walks over to me by the door.

"I love you," he says, kissing my cheek and walking out just as Lunga enters.

"Mr. Mbana," Lunga greets, extending his hand. My dad shoots him a killer look, and I quickly close the door.

"Hey, baby," Lunga says, planting a kiss on my lips.

"Hi, babe," I respond.

"Everything okay? You seem a little pissed," he notes, pulling me to the couch.

"It's my father. The lengths he would go to... Do you know he just accused you of being a pedophile?" I say with a sarcastic chuckle.

"Why would he accuse me of such a thing?" Lunga asks, confused and shaken. I shrug.

"I don't know. He's crazy. He'll say anything to make me leave you," I say, rolling my eyes.

"Wow. I knew he didn't like me, but to make up such things about me? That is... That's just cruel," Lunga says, looking hurt. I climb on top of him, cupping his face.

"I'm sorry my father is like this. I don't know why he would make up such lies about you, but I don't believe him because I know that you would never be that person. You save those kids; you're an amazing man and an amazing father to our daughter

" I say, planting a kiss on his lips.

"Thank you, Rhadie," He says, pulling me in for a kiss. I feel bad for even telling him; dad needs to stop meddling in my business!

"Let's eat," I say.

"I'm not hungry anymore," He says with a sigh.

"Come on, baby, do it for me," I say, grinding on him and kissing him.

"Ha.a Sino, you're at work," says the person whom we screw in his office all the time.

"That's not what your dick is telling me right now," I say, taking his belt off while kissing him; the rest is history. I go to my bathroom to freshen up, leaving him getting dressed in the

office. When I walk in, he's fully dressed and pressing his phone.

"So what's up?" I ask.

"Nothing, catching up on sport. Come, let's eat," he says, with his hand held out for me. I join him, and we eat in peace.

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LUNGA

Mr. Mban'a's actions cross a line, an unforgivable breach that demands immediate intervention. The urgency pulses through my veins like a feverish rhythm. He's gone too far. The weight of the situation presses on my shoulders, and a sense of determination flickers in my eyes. He needs to be stopped.

As the intensity of my emotions surges, a burning question torments my thoughts: How can I convince him of my unwavering love for Sino? The challenge is formidable, yet I can't allow the flames of doubt to smolder.

In a decisive move, I discreetly scribble down Mikayla's number, seizing the opportunity when Sino excuses himself to the restroom. The paper clutched in my hand holds the key to a conversation that needs to happen – a discussion that could alter the course of our intertwined destinies.

The room whispers with the anticipation of secrets, and I vow to navigate the delicate terrain ahead. Sino deserves to know the truth, and I am determined to illuminate the depths of my feelings for him. The forthcoming dialogue with Mikayla holds the promise of revelations, emotions simmering beneath the surface, ready to erupt like a tempestuous storm.

A friend of mine tracks her down, and turns out she's here in the Western Cape. I find her in Bellville, sitting in Spur alone, sipping on a milkshake. I'm shocked; Mr. Mbanja has already flown her here – what a resourceful man. The air is thick with the unexpected presence of Mikayla, and a mixture of surprise and intrigue dances in my gaze. This encounter holds the promise of revelations, emotions swirling beneath the surface like a hidden current waiting to be unveiled.

Seated in Spur, Mikayla sips her milkshake, lost in her own world. "Mikayla," I say, settling opposite her. She looks up, freezing at the unexpected encounter. Attempting to rise, I gently hold her hand, urging her to remain seated.

"Don't cause a scene," I whisper, and she complies, settling back into her seat. Mikayla and I had first crossed paths in our university's first year, where she pursued Marketing while I pursued my course. Love thrived until her sister's tragic demise. I cherished Mikayla, but there was an inexplicable allure about her little sister. Something about children entices me – their

innocent smiles, those legs, the smoothness of their skin, and their angelic voices. Mikayla appears young, around 20, though she's past that age, and Sino, with her baby face and youthful appearance, looks 16. She's perfect, and my love for her knows no bounds.

"I'll talk, and you will listen," I declare, drawing her attention. She rolls her eyes as I slide closer.

"Mikayla, leave the Western Cape before you start losing people you love," I advise calmly.

"You don't scare me," she retorts. In response, I take out my phone, navigate to videos, and open a clip of her son playing in her parents' yard.

"Let's try this again. Leave! Tell Lwando you're a bitter ex of mine who will say anything to taint my reputation," I insist, kissing her cheek. "You're still adorable," I add, placing R100 on the table and smoothly sliding out of the booth. The air crackles with tension, emotions entwined like a delicate dance on the brink of revelation.

LWANDO MBANA

I've been trying to reach Mikayla with no luck. She and I were supposed to meet in Bellville; my wife rarely ventures that way. I shared everything Mikayla told me with Ayola, recording our conversation. However, both Ayola and her daughter prove to be hard-headed. Ayola believes I orchestrated someone to act out the conversation, attempting to convince her otherwise about her precious son-in-law. The air thickens with suspicion and tension, emotions swirling like an intricate dance on the edge of revelation.

I call Mikayla again, and this time, she actually answers.

"Where the hell are you?" I ask, agitated and pissed to the core.

"I'm at the hotel, packing," she says.

"What do you mean you're packing? You haven't met up with my daughter yet," I say, gritting my teeth.

"Mr. Mbana, thank you for the trip and eve..." she begins, but I chuckle, cutting her off.

"Listen to me. Whatever that boy said to you. Whatever his threat was, it's nothing compared to what I would do. So, I suggest you meet my daughter and then do as you please," I declare, dropping the call. This Mikayla chick clearly doesn't

know who she's dealing with, and Lunga is playing a dangerous game, one he won't win! How the hell did he even know she was in town? Unless he took her number down from Sino's desk. DAMMIT. The atmosphere crackles with tension, emotions colliding like a storm on the verge of breaking loose.

I call Sino, and she answers after a long pause.

"Sinokuhle, have you called the number I left on your desk?" I ask as soon as she picks up the call.

"Hello to you too, Mr. Mbana. If this call is not business-related, then I have a meeting I need to get to," she replies. I chuckle; Sino doesn't know me as well as she thinks she does.

"Sinokuhle, I suggest you call the number I left on your desk," I insist.

"Why, Dad, huh? Why? So that whoever Mikayla is can try and convince me that my husband is wrong for me and that he's a pedophile and whatever crap you seem to believe about my husband?" she retorts. I chuckle in disbelief, in anger. I love my daughter, but this stubbornness will get her killed!

"Call Mikayla," I say, then hang up, sending her the conversation between Mikayla and me. I drive to Cape Town, buy my wife lunch, and then head to her workplace. I find her in the office, sitting with one of the Adams' twins. I never liked them; growing up, Ayola had a crush on Ahlume Adams, but the

one she is sitting with now is Ahlumile Adams. He and she grew closer together when Ayola learned she was pregnant.

"Hey, baby," she says as I walk in without knocking.

"Lwando," he says.

"Ahlumile," I also say sternly.

"I didn't know you were busy," I remark.

"If you'd called instead of rocking up, babe, you would know," she says, faking a smile.

"Maybe I should leave," he suggests, getting up.

"Yeah, maybe you should. If you're here, who's bringing your wife lunch, huh?" I ask, taking my blazer off. Please understand that where my wife is concerned, I am territorial to the core. No guy can look at her, no guy can smile at her; just keep it to yourself, and we won't have any kind of trouble.

"Ayola, I'll see you around, okay," he says, pulling her in for a hug and a kiss on the forehead. I chuckle; this guy is testing me, I swear! The atmosphere crackles with possessiveness and unspoken tension, emotions entwined like a complicated dance in the small office space.

"Bye, Ahlumile, and thank you for the visit," she says, walking him out. She comes back and turns to me.

"You're welcome," I say, settling down where Ahlumile was sitting.

"Your jealousy is not flattering," she remarks, throwing herself on the couch.

"No wife of mine is going to sit in a closed office and flirt with her ex-crush!" I declare, the air thick with possessiveness and unspoken tension. Emotions tangle like a complicated dance, and the room becomes a battleground for unspoken desires and territorial claims.

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SINOKUHLE

I press the phone to my ear, the anticipation making my heart race as her voice, like a sultry whisper, emerges from the other end. Her words weave a tangled web, a seductive dance of deception. I can feel the weight of skepticism in the air, like a thick fog enveloping us. With every syllable, she paints a portrait of a distorted reality, a canvas of madness that Lunga had seemingly encountered.

As she spills her twisted tales, I can sense the delicate balance between curiosity and doubt within me. The phone becomes a conduit for the surreal, her claims echoing in the caverns of my

mind. I decide to meet her, to dive into the labyrinth of her psyche and separate fact from fiction.

The emotions entangle me, a complex puzzle of skepticism, curiosity, and a hint of trepidation. The air is thick with anticipation as I prepare to confront the enigma that is Mikayla. It's a journey into the unknown

a journey fueled by the need to unravel the mysteries woven into the tapestry of human experience.

"Hello," she purrs, her voice a sweet melody that caresses my ears. I can almost feel the warmth of her breath as she utters each word.

"Hi, you are speaking to Sinokuhle Mbana Langa, I am the daughter of Lwando Mbana. He left me your number," I declare, my tone a mix of curiosity and determination. There's a pause, and then she clears her throat, a subtle prelude to the revelation that awaits.

"Are you married to Khumbulani Langa?" she inquires, her words hanging in the air like a delicate promise.

"Yes, I am. Can we meet? If you're not busy or if you're around in the Western Cape," I propose, the air thick with anticipation.

She goes silent, a pregnant pause that stretches like a moment frozen in time. "Mikayla, are you still there?" I inquire, breaking the stillness.

"Yes, I'm still here. Yes, we can meet. Where do you work?" she responds, her voice carrying a mysterious allure. I share the details, guiding her to my workplace and providing the necessary information.

"Thank you, see you in a bit," she says, her words lingering like a promise in the air. I end the call and head to my meeting, the anticipation of our encounter lingering in the recesses of my mind.

As I emerge from the meeting, there she is, a vision of allure with well-shaped curves and copper-red hair cascading over her shoulders. She's studying a picture of my family and me on my desk.

"Mikayla," I say, breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry for prying. Yes, Sinokuhle?" she responds, gracefully walking toward me.

"Yes, I am. Thank you for meeting me," I say, gesturing for her to take a seat on the couch.

"Can I get you anything to eat or drink?" I offer, captivated by her beauty. She declines politely.

"No thank you. Why am I here?" she questions, her eyes locking onto mine. I can't help but marvel at her youthfulness, her beauty a testament to good genes. I take out my phone and play the audio from my dad. She listens intently, and then, with

a simple request, she stops the playback, leaving the room filled with a sense of intrigue and unspoken mysteries.

"Mrs. Langa, that is me, but I only said what I said because your father asked me to. Yes, my little sister died, but it wasn't Lunga. She was struggling with depression, and Lunga did his best to try and help her, but his best just wasn't enough. I am sorry for all of this. Your husband is a good man. I messed things up between us while we were dating, and I will forever live to regret the stuff I said on that clip. Khumbulani is nothing but a loving guy, and I'm just a bitter ex," she confesses with a chuckle, a mix of regret and relief in her voice. The air, once thick with tension, now carries the weight of understanding.

We talk for a while, sharing pictures of our families. As we part ways, heading to the parking lot together, my husband awaits me outside the car with our daughter inside. A smile fades from his face as he sees Mikayla.

"I should go," she says, sensing the tension.

"Oh, come on, a simple hello won't hurt," I insist, pulling her closer. She hesitates but acquiesces.

"Babe, look who's in town," I announce cheerfully.

"Mikayla, what are you doing here?" he asks sternly.

"Babe, come on, don't be rude," I implore, brushing his upper arm.

"I can't play nice and smile to the person who almost made me lose my license, Sino. I'll be in the car when you're ready to leave," he retorts angrily.

"Mika..." I begin, attempting to mediate.

"No, it's okay, Sino. I don't blame him for his behavior towards me. It was nice meeting you," Mikayla says, gracefully walking away. I get in the car, and he stares straight ahead.

"Babe," I say, seeking his attention, but he remains silent.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I just met with her to get Dad off your case, and Dad was wrong about you," I explain, reaching out to touch his hand.

"So you needed my ex to confirm the kind of person I am? Wow, Sino," he responds, starting the car.

"I thought you knew me. I don't know anymore," he adds, leaving me with a sense of guilt and regret.

LUNGA

The plot thickens, and I find myself entangled in a web of emotions. I don't understand the game Mr. Mbaná is playing, but one thing is clear: he underestimates the strength of our love. Sino and I share a bond that transcends the petty games people play.

As I reflect on the situation, a sinister satisfaction creeps into my thoughts. My threat to Mikayla seems to have hit its mark, leaving her cautious and aware that crossing me comes at a cost. The power dynamic has shifted, and I revel in the knowledge that she now understands not to mess with me.

The air is charged with tension, and I brace myself for the twists and turns that lie ahead. Love, loyalty, and a touch of manipulation dance in the shadows, creating a complex narrative that only time will unfold.

I carry my anger like a storm cloud, thunder rumbling within me as we arrive home. Sino walks inside, and I follow closely behind, the tension thick in the air. Once inside, I gently place our daughter, Mhllali, on the couch, her innocence a stark contrast to the emotional tempest swirling around us.

"Babe," she whispers, her voice so tender it pierces through my anger. I resist the urge to respond, choosing to look at her instead.

"Mbutho, please say something," she implores, her plea hanging in the air.

"Something like what? That this marriage is not what I thought it was? That you don't trust me? That you would believe everyone else but me? I thought you loved me, Sinokuhle, but clearly, I was wrong," I express, the bitterness of disappointment lacing my words.

"Baby, it's nothing like that. Listen," she says, cupping my face, forcing me to meet her gaze. "I am sorry. I messed up, I know. I'm sorry for going behind your back and meeting your ex. I'm sorry my father has been doing things to break us up from day one. If it makes you feel better, I will quit my job and stay home. Baby, I'm sorry."

"No, you don't have to quit your job, but sort your father out. Your father can't always be the cause of our arguments every damn time, Sinokuhle. He needs to learn to mind his own business. He needs to stop digging into things about my past. And you, you need to learn to trust me. If you want to know anything about me, just ask me and not go digging into things about me," I assert, rising from my seat and walking out.

I undress and step into the shower, seeking solace in the cascade of water. She joins me, her presence a silent apology. She hugs me from behind, kissing my back.

"I'm sorry," she whispers with each tender kiss. "I'm really sorry." The shower becomes a sanctuary where apologies are spoken in the language of touch, attempting to mend the fractures in our relationship.

The intimacy between us becomes a tumultuous dance of passion and apology. She turns me around, a silent invitation, and stands on her tiptoes to kiss my lips. The connection deepens as her lips explore every inch of my chest, descending with purpose. On her knees, she takes control, demonstrating a mastery that leaves me breathless. My wife knows how to please, and her actions speak louder than words.

As the waves of pleasure crest, she returns to my lips, still carrying the weight of her plea. She wraps her arms around my neck, and in a moment of primal desire, I lift her right leg around my waist. Without warning, I penetrate her, the union of our bodies a raw expression of our connection. The intensity builds until release, and we carry our passion to the bedroom, where the symphony of our bodies plays on.

Exhausted, we lie side by side, our breathing heavy, bodies entwined in the aftermath of our shared ardor. Sleep claims us, and I awaken to the gentle touch of Mihlali's tiny hands playing

on my face. I marvel at the sight of our daughter, a beautiful reflection of her mother. While she inherited most of her features from Sino, the ears and nose are my own contributions to this portrait of familial love.

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LWANDO

Recognizing the need to stay ahead of Lunga's elusive nature, I decide to take matters into my own hands. With a strategic mindset, I send him a location to meet up, choosing a casual restaurant as the setting – an unassuming place, devoid of any frills.

The message is clear: I am taking control, determined to unravel the mysteries he hides and protect my family from whatever deceit he might weave. As the stage is set for our meeting, I brace myself for the confrontation that awaits, ready to face the enigma that is Lunga head-on.

As Lunga walks into the restaurant, his gaze finds me immediately. Without hesitation, he takes a seat opposite me. The morning light filters through the windows, casting a soft glow over the scene. The restaurant has just opened its doors 30 minutes ago, creating an atmosphere of quiet anticipation as

we prepare to engage in a conversation that may unveil the truths he has skillfully concealed.

"Mr. Mbana," he greets with a hint of formality.

"Call me Lwando; you've earned it," I respond calmly, gesturing for a more familiar address.

"I don't understand, sir," he says, his expression one of confusion.

"The way you play is unique, nothing like what I'm used to. You were able to fool my daughter and wife, so please, call me Lwando," I say, extending my hand in a gesture of camaraderie. He looks at my hand, then up at my face.

"Mr. Mbana, I'm confused," he admits, a puzzled expression on his face. I chuckle sarcastically.

"You had me fooled

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I'll admit. I mean, the fancy English, suit and tie, how you carry yourself... Everything. At some point, I even believed you were perfect for my daughter. Heck, you were perfect for me too, even. But this is the thing. Nobody is perfect, Lunga, not on this planet. So I started digging. I thought maybe you'd be part of your father's branch or something, but nope, nothing. Then I thought maybe you really are clean. I mean, someone like you,

someone of your status, caliber, nature couldn't possibly be a pedophile. I mean, I would have never guessed it," I say, sipping my coffee as I lay out the pieces of the puzzle. He listens attentively, the gravity of the situation sinking in.

"I didn't think it possible until I hired someone at your work to keep a close eye on you and how the kids reacted towards you, and there it was. Some of them were afraid of you, and some worshipped you," I calmly explain, laying bare the evidence.

"Something had to be up. I'm one of the world's most dangerous people, but even I'm not squeaky clean like that. You seem like you like my daughter," I continue, but he interrupts.

"I love Sino. She's my life," he declares earnestly.

I chuckle, a wry smile playing on my lips. "And just as you say that, you understand where I'm coming from. You understand that I will go to hell and beyond to protect her, even if it means killing you right here and right now."

Throughout the conversation, I maintain an eerie calmness, but irritation builds as he remains unnervingly composed.

"But I'm not going to kill you," I pause for dramatic effect. "Just yet. I'm here to give you an ultimatum. Leave. Leave Cape Town and go be a chief as the rightful heir, or I kill you," I declare, my words hanging in the air.

He chuckles, a nonchalant response that grates on my nerves. "You kill me, then you risk Sino hating you, Mr. Mbana, if you may," he states, rising and walking out.

I chuckle to myself, acknowledging the test before me. "Ndiyalingwa!" I mutter under my breath in isiXhosa.

I call the waitress, settle the bill, gather my things, and leave. On my way to work, Sino calls, and I answer with a calm demeanor.

"Marhadebe," I say.

"Dad, you're taking this too far!" she exclaims angrily. The storm is brewing, and I brace myself for the tempest that awaits.

"Keep doing this, and I swear to you I'm leaving! I'll job hunt, and we both know I'll get the job!" she declares, her words laced with frustration. I chuckle, a response that only fuels her anger.

"Dad, this is not funny! I will leave!" she insists, her fiery demeanor reminiscent of her mother when angered.

"Where will you go, baby? We both know I have connections everywhere. Even so, you are the highest-paid person in this country for your job position. Stop making unnecessary threats now," I say calmly, intentionally pushing her buttons.

"Dad," she sighs, a defeated tone in her voice. "All I've ever done was to live my life how you wanted me to. Please, just this once, let me live it for me and me only. Sure, you don't like my husband, but this obsession needs to stop. It needs to end, Daddy, please. We can't go on like this, else we will end up losing each other in the process."

Her words hit me like a heavy blow, and for a moment, I'm left feeling defeated. I love Sino, perhaps more than the rest, given that she was my first and played a significant role in the union with my wife. The pain in her voice resonates with the agony within me. But my fatherly instincts refuse to let my daughter stay with what I perceive as a monster. What about my granddaughter?

"Sino, I love you. I really want us to sort this out and be how we used to, but with this monster you're married to, baby, I'm afraid I can't. You're my daughter; what kind of father would I be if I didn't try to protect you? I'd hate myself if anything ever happened to you or Mihlali," I admit, my voice heavy with the weight of the situation.

"Dad, I understand, but this has to stop," she pleads, her cry resonating with pain.

"Okay, for your sake," I say, knowing deep down that it's not that simple.

"Thank you, Daddy. I love you," she says before we end the call. As I arrive at the office, everything begins to spin. Dizziness overtakes me, and my head throbs with sudden pain. I attempt to reach my office quickly, but I collapse to the floor, a sudden and unexpected turn in the already tumultuous day.

AYOLA

The urgency in the call from my husband's workplace sends my heart into a frenzied rhythm. The news that he has collapsed, and an ambulance has been summoned, grips me with worry. My mind races with possibilities, and I can't shake the fear of another episode. Though these instances have become rarer with time, the threat still lingers, casting a shadow over our lives.

With a sense of urgency, I pack up my necessities, my mind clouded with concern. The journey to the hospital becomes a blur, my thoughts consumed by the well-being of the man I love. As I navigate the path to where he lies, I can't help but ponder the unpredictable nature of mental health and the toll it takes on both the afflicted and their loved ones.

"Mrs. Mban, there's..." my assistant begins, but I cut her off, my mind focused on the urgency of the situation.

"My husband is on his way to the hospital. Cancel all my meetings," I instruct, my voice firm and unwavering.

"Ma'am, Mr. Bess requested..." she tries again, but I interrupt once more, my priorities crystal clear.

"Did you miss the part where I told you my husband is being taken to the hospital? Cancel all my meetings. Mr. Bess can get the report some other time," I assert, leaving her stunned.

I lose all sense of composure when it comes to my family. As I rush to my car, I call Sino, knowing she can handle the news better than the others.

"Mommy," she answers, her voice a mix of concern and uncertainty.

"Baby, your father is being rushed to the hospital. Meet me there," I explain, speaking rapidly as I start my car. The gravity of the situation hits me – what if it's serious? What if I lose him? The thought of losing Lwando Mbana, my ride or die, is unbearable. Without him, I would be nothing.

"Mom, what do you mean?" she asks, panic evident in her voice. I know their relationship has been strained, but deep down, they love each other fiercely, willing to fight and sacrifice for one another despite their disagreements.

"Baby, calm down. Just meet me at the hospital," I say, ending the call. Tears stream down my cheeks, a mixture of fear and love for the man who holds my heart.

I wipe away the tears as I drive through the traffic, the knot in my stomach tightening with each passing moment. Arriving at the hospital, I see the medical team rushing him inside. I follow

closely behind, my heart pounding, but the confines of the hospital's protocol restrict me beyond a certain point. The doctor reassures me that he will be fine, but the wait is agonizing.

Seated on the cold benches, I feel the weight of uncertainty pressing down on me. It's in this vulnerable moment that Sino walks in. We meet halfway, and without a word, we share a hug, drawing strength from each other in the face of the unknown. The hospital corridors echo with the silent hope that Lwando will emerge from this ordeal unscathed.

"Mom, what happened to him?" Sino inquires, her concern mirroring my own. The question hangs in the air, but even I can't provide an answer. Lwando is resilient, rarely falling ill aside from the challenges posed by his mental health. He takes care of his body, making this sudden situation all the more perplexing.

"I don't know, baby," I admit, feeling the weight of uncertainty settle around us. Just as the tension heightens, my phone rings—it's Saney.

"You have to answer her, or she'll get suspicious," Sino advises. I pick up, trying to sound composed.

"Hey, baby," I greet, an unusual term of endearment for my daughter.

"Hey, Mom, is everything okay?" Saney inquires with genuine concern.

"Yes, Lala, what's up?" I respond, trying to maintain a sense of normalcy.

"Dad's not answering my calls. Any idea where he might be?" she asks, and I exchange a glance with Sino, who shrugs. I sigh.

"Baby, your father is in the hospital. I don't know what happened to him, and none of the doctors have said anything yet," I reveal, waiting for her reaction. She remains silent for a moment.

"Saney?" I prompt.

"Uhm, yes, Mom, I'm still here. Which hospital?" she asks, her calm demeanor contrasting with the gravity of the situation.

"Baby, go to your class. I've got this; Sino is here with me," I say, attempting to ease her worry.

"Yola, he's more important than some class. I'll call Thando to come fetch me," she decides before abruptly ending the call. Saney's actions don't surprise me; she's always been her own person.

"She just dropped the call on me," I remark to Sino, who chuckles.

"That's Saneey for you," she comments. Just then, Lwando's friend appears.

"Tell me he's okay," I implore. Sino sighs.

"He's okay. He's great, actually. We don't know what could have caused him to collapse. What I don't understand is how one minute his heart is faint, and the next, it's beating normally," she explains with evident confusion. The mystery deepens, and we are left grappling with the unknown, seeking answers that remain elusive.

"Where is he? I want to see him," I demand, my concern fueling my urgency.

"I, uhhmm... Please follow me," his friend stammers, leading the way to his room. As we enter, there he is, casually chilling on the bed as if nothing happened.

"Baby," I call out, rushing into his arms.

"Majola," he greets, squeezing me tight.

"Don't you ever scare me like that," I scold, still nestled in his embrace.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he assures, planting a kiss on my neck. Breaking away from the hug, he gives me a smirk.

"Oku," he teases.

"Daddy, I'm so sorry," Sino apologizes with teary eyes.

"Baby, it's okay. Come here," he reassures, inviting her into the warmth of his embrace. The relief washes over me as we share a moment of gratitude for his unexpected recovery.

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SINOKUHLE

Dad scared us. The sight of him on that bed, vulnerable and seemingly fragile, is painful. A wave of guilt washes over me as I blame myself for what happened to him.

I walk over to him, seeking solace in a hug. We make up, and just as my siblings walk into the room, Dad appears fine for a while. However, suddenly, he starts acting strangely, almost as if he's having an episode. One moment he's laughing, and the next, he's cursing. Concerned, Saney leaves the room to call his doctor

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who kindly asks us to step outside as nurses rush into the room.

I'm scared. It feels like ages since his bipolar disorder acted up, and the sudden resurgence of his symptoms leaves us all on edge, grappling with the uncertainty of the situation.

"Mom, who are you calling?" I inquire as I walk over to her.

"His doctor," she replies, engaging in a conversation with the medical professional. She steps away from us, leaving us all in suspense.

"He's going to be okay, right?" Thando asks, seeking reassurance. I can only shrug, my own anxiety mirrored in his question.

"He's going to be fine. If everything looks normal, like his brain scans and stuff, then they won't admit him to the loony bin," Saneey assures, attempting to lighten the mood. Still, the unease lingers – Dad doesn't belong in such a place, and he does everything in his power to avoid it.

"So, what did his doctor say?" Saneey inquires. I turn, and Mom is right behind me.

"He's not in town, and he won't be for the next two weeks, but he'll send someone," Mom reveals with a tinge of disappointment.

"Can't Lunga do something to help him out?" Thando suggests.

"I'll call and ask," I decide, taking out my phone.

"Sino, you know how your father feels about him. Let's wait for the doctor first," Mom advises calmly. Ignoring her, I text my husband, hoping for a prompt response. Unfortunately, none

comes to relieve my growing anxiety. Then, I recall he mentioned having a meeting at 10 today.

"Doc?" my brother interjects, drawing our attention.

"Well, I sedated him. I'll call his psychologist to come have a look at him, and we'll take it from there," the doctor informs, offering a glimpse of hope amid the uncertainty.

"How bad is he?" Mom asks, her worry etched across her face.

"We won't know until we do a brain scan. If it's bad, we might have to admit him," the doctor explains, and Mom clasps her mouth in shock. I gently brush her back.

"His doctor said he would send another doctor he trusts," I offer, attempting to provide some reassurance. The doctor sighs.

"Okay. When the doctor gets here, have them page me, okay?" I nod in acknowledgment.

"Thank you, Doc," I express gratitude as she leaves.

"Saney, you should go back to school. Thando, you should go back to work. You too, Sino. I will call you when or if anything happens to him," Mom calmly advises.

"No, Mom, we're not leaving you here alone," Saney argues vehemently.

"Saney, this is not open for discussion!" Mom asserts, walking into Dad's room.

"Well, the queen has spoken," Thando remarks.

"You can't possibly tell me you guys are leaving? This is our father, for heaven's sake! You guys can leave if you want," Saney retorts, standing her ground.

"Saney, Mom has her reasons for sending us away," I explain, but she remains resolute.

"I don't care. I'm not leaving this hospital until I hear that my father is fine," she declares, leaving Thando and me alone. We sigh simultaneously.

"Come," he says, leading me to a bench.

"What's up?" I inquire, and he pats the bench, signaling for me to sit.

"What's going on?" he asks, and I widen my eyes, waiting for him to elaborate.

"What's going on between you and Dad, Sino? You're stressed, he's been stressed out lately. I saw how you were with him. So talk to me," Thando urges, concern etched on his face.

I breathe out, tucking strands of hair behind my ear. "I don't know, T. Dad believes that Lunga is a pedophile," I confess. Thando's jaw drops for a second, and I nod.

"That's extreme. You think he's lying?" he asks. I nod in agreement.

"Yes, Dad has hated him since day one. He felt like he was too perfect, and he still feels like he's too perfect. He never stopped digging until he came back telling me he's a child abuser, and he came to me with Lunga's ex who said she made everything up together with Dad... I don't know, T. I'm just being played here."

He looks at me for a while and then nods. "When have you known Dad to make such shit up?" he questions.

I chuckle at his question. "Dad manipulates. That's all he ever does, meddle and manipulate," I explain.

"He may manipulate and meddle, but his heart is always in the right place. Dad would never go through such lengths to get you to break up with someone. If he wanted Lunga out of our family, he would have called up his people and got him a job elsewhere, like he did with Bantubonke. Think about this, Sino," Thando advises, patting my knee. "He loves you, maybe more than any of us. Don't overlook this one; he's probably right."

He walks inside Dad's room, leaving me to contemplate his words. I don't know how to feel about what Thando said; he has a point, but what if he's wrong? Am I ready to go to war with my husband over something that might not even be?

As I walk into Dad's room, he's peacefully sleeping, and Thando's words linger in my mind. A doctor enters with someone familiar – Saney's therapist, Dr. Lewis Bar.

"Doc, you came," Saney greets.

"This is my therapist, Dr. Lewis Bar," she introduces to us.

"Nice to meet you all. Can we have the room, please?" Dr. Bar requests, and we are forced to step outside.

Outside, we stand in contemplation until Lunga arrives, concerned for Dad's well-being.

"Baby, I saw your message when I got out of the meeting. How is he?" he asks, pulling me into a comforting hug.

"He'll be fine. Thank you for coming," I express my gratitude. Lunga turns to the rest of my family.

We head home, and I'm consumed by worry and fear for my dad. Lunga breaks the silence, suggesting that maybe it's a good thing Dad is being sent to a mental institute.

"Excuse me?" I respond, taken aback.

"Babe, hear me out. I took a look at his file, and he's not mentally stable yet to be out. He could harm your mother or anyone around him," Lunga explains, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

"I'm sorry, but this is how it should be until they declare him fit," he insists.

"Are you a sick perverted monster who preys on kids?" I ask, looking down.

"Not this again, Sino. It's getting old," he says, walking away from me.

"You still haven't answered me, Khumbulani," I press.

"What do you want me to say, Sino, huh?" he asks angrily.

"My question remains the same. Are you a pedophile?" I repeat, my tone unwavering.

He chuckles sarcastically. "I'm not going to answer that. If you want to believe fabricated lies about me, then so be it. I can't be with someone who constantly questions the person that I am when all I've ever done is love them and treat them right. If you believing me to be a pedophile makes you sleep at night, then so be it, Marhadebe," he says before walking out.

Dad remained confined within the walls of the mental health facility, a fortress that seemed impenetrable to the rest of us. He adamantly refused any contact, shutting himself off from the family he once cherished. The mere thought of him rejecting Mom, the woman he vowed to stand by, was unfathomable.

I found myself caught in a web of confusion, grappling with the unknown while trying to navigate the turbulent waters of our family's business. The responsibility of keeping the company afloat rested heavily on my shoulders. Every decision felt like a precarious step, taken without the guidance and wisdom of the one person who had always been my anchor.

In this whirlwind of uncertainty, Uncle Aphiwe, Mom's steadfast brother, emerged as a pillar of support. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, he stepped in to assist with the daunting task of maintaining our family's enterprises. It wasn't an easy undertaking, but options were limited, and we had to press on.

The weight of Dad's undisclosed condition cast a shadow over us, clouding our days with an unsettling sense of unease. Managing the intricate web of the family business in the midst of such personal turmoil felt like walking a tightrope without a safety net.

As the challenges persisted, the bonds that held us together as a family were tested. We clung to the hope that, with time and determination, we could overcome the adversity that threatened to tear us apart. The path ahead remained uncertain, but we faced it head-on, bound by a resilient spirit that refused to yield to the trials life had thrown our way.

Lunga and I have managed to work through our issues, engaging in heartfelt conversations that brought us back to a place of understanding. We're in a good place now, our connection stronger after navigating the challenges that had momentarily strained us.

Surprisingly, Lunga received a job offer in PMB, and the mere consideration of such a significant change sparked a week-long debate between us. Ultimately, he decided not to accept the offer. The idea of leaving during a time of uncertainty and family upheaval was something neither of us could fathom. Our commitment to weathering the storms together prevailed, anchoring us in the present and reinforcing our shared sense of responsibility to face whatever lay ahead as a united front.

Mihlali is my little haven, a constant reminder of the blessings in my life. Each time I gaze upon her, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. Considering the joy and vibrancy she brings into our lives, I find myself contemplating the idea of expanding our family and welcoming another little one.

My baby girl is a bundle of energy and life, radiating warmth and joy. The bond she shares with her grandmother is truly heartwarming. Almost every weekend, and occasionally for more extended periods, Mihlali spends cherished moments with her granny. Their connection is a source of immense joy, and witnessing the special bond they share is a testament to the love and family ties that bind us together.

It's Friday, and I'm driving with Mihlali. I'm taking her to Mom's place when my phone rings, and it's Thando.

"Sino," he says.

"Hi bro, unjani?" I ask, and he suddenly makes unpleasant sounds.

"Eish Sino. What are you doing? Can we talk?" he inquires.

"Everything OK?" I ask, concerned.

"Late lunch?" he suggests.

"Let me drop Mihlali at Mom's, and then I'll be there," I say.

"Ok cool," he replies, and like that, the call is ended. I get to my parents' house, park outside, and make my way to the door. We knock and let ourselves in.

"We both know my husband would never not want to see me! Make a plan that I see him, tomorrow Steve," Mom says, yelling.

"Mrs. Mbana, we're doing our best. He just doesn't want to see anyone. Your father has called anyone and everyone, but nothing," Steve says, defeated. We walk in, and Mihlali throws herself at her grandmother.

"Mom, Steve. How are you?" I say. Steve is Mom's go-to guy for making things happen.

"Hi Sino, how are you?" he says.

"I'm good, thanks, and yourself?" I ask, throwing myself on the couch.

"I'm good, ma'am," he says.

"What's new with Dad?" I ask as he gets up.

"He still refuses to see anyone. He only meets with his doctor. I've tried everything possible," he says.

"Clearly not everything if they won't at least give me a minute with him," Mom says, clearly annoyed.

"Ma'a..." Steve begins, but Mom cuts him off.

"Go do your job, Steve. If I don't see my husband tomorrow, you're fired," she says

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dismissing him. He looks at me, and I shrug. He walks out.

"Mom," I say, but she cuts me off.

"How are you? How are things with Lunga?" she asks. I already know she doesn't want to talk.

"All is good. I should get going; I'm meeting your son for lunch," I say, getting up.

"Ok, have fun. I'll come drop her off Sunday or Monday after school," she says. I nod, kiss their foreheads, and say my goodbyes.

I call Thando, and he tells me where he is. I get there, and he's with Saney. I greet them, giving each of them a hug.

"How's Mom?" Saney asks as I settle into the chair.

"She's stressed. Today she was shouting at Steve about this thing with Dad not wanting to see anyone. She even threatened to fire him if she doesn't see Dad tomorrow," I say, and Saney gasps in shock.

"Come on, the guy is trying. Dad is the one who doesn't want visitors, mos," Saney defends. I shrug.

"We all know how our parents are. Do you honestly believe our father, of all people, would refuse to see his wife? Come on, something's not right here," Thando points out. A waiter brings my drink and leaves.

"We will never understand why Dad does half the things he does," I say.

"Argh, let's talk about something else, like why we're here," says Saney, dismissing the whole topic.

"Well, I popped the question," Thando says. We both look at him.

"What question?" Saney asks, and I poke her.

"You getting married?" I ask in shock, and he nods. I get off my chair to hug him.

"I didn't even know you were dating. Is it a girl?" Saney asks, laughing.

"Mxm, Saney," we say at the same time while I return to my seat.

"So who is it?" I ask all excited.

"Her name is Thabisa. I met her in my final year in varsity, and we've been kicking it since. Last night I popped the question, and she said yes. She's a chemical analyst. You'll meet her tonight at Mom's house," Thando says.

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LUNGA

I can't fathom why Mr. Mbanja refuses to meet with his family. After examining his file, it appears he's quite ordinary. If I

weren't familiar with his condition, I wouldn't label him as bipolar... that's how stable he appears. While the girls are away, I seize the opportunity to visit him.

"I'm here for Mr. Mbana," I inform the receptionist, displaying my card.

"Head down the corridor and take a left. Someone will take you to him," she instructs. I follow her guidance, and soon, an escort leads me to his room. I find him lying on his back, seemingly idle. I walk in and take a seat.

"How the mighty have fallen," I remark. He turns to me but remains silent.

"What? Don't you have anything to say to me? No threats? Nothing?" I press, but he merely shakes his head.

"Nope, I'm at peace here. I need not worry about you or your lies," he responds calmly. I'm left speechless. Why is he so composed?

"I got a job offer a few months back, but I couldn't take it because of your daughter," I say, hoping to elicit a reaction. Still, there's no response.

"Anyway, I'm thinking of taking that job, leaving with my family, and being far from you," I continue.

"Congratulations," he responds dispassionately.

"I look forward to the day my daughter sees you for who you truly are," he adds, turning away.

"You'll see yourself out," he dismisses me. As I leave, I can't shake the feeling that there's more to his calm demeanor than meets the eye. What game is he playing, and why won't he give me the reaction I expect?

I meet up with one of the workers.

"I'm Dr. Khumbulani Langa. I need you to keep an eye on Mr. Mbana for me. I want to know his visitors, his sleeping pattern... Just everything!" I say, and he nods.

"Your name is?" I ask.

"Steve, sir," he says. I nod and leave.

PRESENT - 6 MONTHS AGO

I'm on my way to work when I receive a message containing a photo of Khumbulani in his office, with a child sitting on his lap and his hand under her skirt. The child looks scared. A chilling message follows.

I lock my phone, hiding the disturbing message from Lunga.

"Hey, baby," he greets, hugging me from behind and startling me. I quickly compose myself.

"Hey, babe," I respond, unwrapping his arms from around me.

"You okay? You seem a little tense," he observes, turning me to face him. I nod, trying to hide my unease.

"I'm fine. I just got disturbing news, that's all," I say, stepping back.

"Well, what's this news that's got you all worked up?" he inquires.

I turn and walk to the sink, feigning composure. "Layla lost her father," I state.

"I need to go see her," I add, my mind racing to cover up the unsettling revelation.

"Need me to come with you?" Lunga offers, moving closer.

I feel an overwhelming sense of disgust, and the stench of his cologne makes me nauseous. I manage to hold it together physically, but internally, I'm grappling with the need to play it cool and not reveal my true emotions. Dad would know what to do, but he's not even in the country. I'm left to navigate this on my own. How do I keep up this façade?

"Baby, you okay?" He asks, holding my hair back. I nod, quickly rinsing my mouth.

"Are you sure, Sino?" He inquires.

"I am fine!" I snap, pulling away from him. I head up to our room.

"Sino," he says, walking behind me.

"I'll fetch Mihilali today," I state, packing my work things.

"Why? I normally fetch her," he comments.

I nod. "I know, but I'll have a half day today, so I figured why not." I walk out.

"Oh," is all he can say. I get inside my car, and another message beeps, this time a video, captioned "I hope this is enough to make you leave him."

I dumbly open the video, and it's a disturbing footage of him and the child from the picture. The scene is much worse than what I initially thought. Disgust overwhelms me, and I quickly

turn off my phone, trying to erase the horrifying images from my mind. I don't know where I'm driving to, but i can't go to work.

Not now, not like this. I drive to a place Bantu once took me on the night my father called demanding I come home immediately. I get out of the car and just scream. The sharp pain in my heart won't stop. Dad was right about him. All those years I thought he was making things up, but he wasn't. Everything he ever said about Lunga was true. My husband finds pleasure in kids. Oh my God, Mihlali! The thought of my baby girl going through that breaks my heart into a million pieces. Tears stream down my face as I get back into my car.

I arrive at Saney's place, and they're about to leave. I grab Mihlali and hug her tightly.

"Sino, what's going on?" Saney asks, as confused as Mihlali.

"Mommy, stop," Hlali says, giggling. I put her down.

"I have to take Hlali to the hospital," I say, taking her bag from Saney.

"Why? She's not sick, mos," Saney says with that confused look of hers.

"You've been crying," she points out.

"Thank you for keeping her, bye, sis."

"I say, walking with my baby to the car. I strap her in and get in my seat, then drive off to the hospital. I ask that they examine her, and they tell me that she's fine, never been touched or whatsoever. We get to the car, and Saney is standing outside my car. I open the door for Mihlali, strap her in, then lock the car.

"What's going on, Sino?" she asks. I breathe out.

"Dad was right. He was right about Lunga," I say.

"Sis, you'll have to be a little more detailed," she says.

"Lunga is a pedophile," I say,

She shakes her head. "Nah, you're seeing things. Come on, Sino," she says

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dismissing me. I open the car, find my phone, switch it on, and unlock it, then show Saney the messages.

"The heck is this? How? Sino, you have to show this to the police," she insists. I hadn't thought that far. We get into our cars, with her driving behind me. I reach the station while she watches Mihlali in my car, then ask to talk to someone who can help me. A big guy, looking like a person who is in charge, leads me to his office.

"Mrs. Langa," he says, and I frown. How does he know me? The air thickens with uncertainty and concern, emotions swirling like a storm on the horizon.

"You're married to Lunga, the daughter of Lwando Mbana," he says, and for a second, I let my guard down. I'm probably known because of my father.

"And you are?" I ask.

"Malwande will do. How can I help you?" he asks, placing his hands on the table.

"My husband is a pedophile," I say.

"Those are some wild accusations, Ma'am," he responds.

"I have a video and a picture as proof. Will that be enough to arrest him?" I ask, unlocking my phone.

"Let's see," I hand him my phone where the message is, and he plays the video. Apparently, it goes on longer than I thought. Saney said it's 20 minutes long.

"This is, uh, well," he says, handing me my phone. The atmosphere in the room is charged with tension, emotions entangled like a web waiting to be unraveled.

"We will have to copy the video to our system and the picture too, then have a warrant of arrest made for him," he says, getting up.

"I'll be right back, okay," he says and walks out. The room is filled with anticipation and unease, emotions swirling like a tempest as the weight of the situation settles in.

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LWANDO

My wife had to go away on business in the states for a month or so. She doesn't leave the country without me unless I'm busy, and her stay is less than a week. She's at work, and I get a call from Bantu. The air is thick with curiosity and a sense of the unexpected, emotions swirling like a quiet storm on the horizon.

"Long time," I say, answering.

"Mr. Mbana, hi, how are you?" he says.

"I'm alive and well. How's the Eastern Cape?" I ask.

"Steve got the video we needed; I sent it to Sino anonymously. Let's hope she does the right thing," he says.

"You did good. So what does this mean for you? What do you want in return?" I ask.

"I just want Sino and her daughter away from that monster," he says with so much determination in his voice.

"Let's hope she does the right thing. Thank you for your help," I say.

"It's nothing. Bye, Mr. Mbana," he says, then ends the call. I call Steve; he answers after a while.

"Steve, where are we at with my daughter?" I ask.

"She's at the police station, sir," he says.

"Talk to our contact and make sure that my daughter is helped. I don't want him in prison when I'm back," I say.

"I'll deliver him personally to you at the warehouse," he says.

"Great. Thanks, Steve," I say.

"Not a problem, sir."

"Also, take care of my children," I say before dropping the call. The atmosphere is charged with a mix of relief and tension, emotions swirling like a storm on the brink of breaking loose.

When I was hospitalized, we found out that my pills had been switched, with hopes to make me appear crazy. The doctor and I came up with this idea that she fakes my results, and I'll handle the rest. We had my family convinced that my bipolar disorder was worsening, so they could persuade my doctor to have me committed to a mental institution, and it worked. The air is thick with the weight of this deceptive plan, emotions entangled in a web of secrecy and manipulation.

Ayola knows me more than anyone, and if I had allowed her to visit me, then I wouldn't have succeeded in trying to bring Lunga down. If he believed I was not mentally stable, then he was going to let his guard down, and he did. The atmosphere is heavy with the weight of strategic deception, emotions entangled in a complex dance of manipulation and cunning.

The facility he runs is of high security. Hacking into their system took us three months, and when they called in people to repair, that's when my team got the opportunity to plant cameras in there, and it worked. I also took the time to build connections because a man like him doesn't give up easily. So that's what I've been busy with. The air is thick with the tension of a covert operation, emotions entangled in the intricate web of strategy and planning.

Now I'm just waiting for Sino to call me and ask for my help. The air is charged with anticipation, emotions entangled in the web of a plan set into motion, waiting for the final act to unfold.

LUNGA

Sino's been acting weird since morning, and I don't know why. Last night was awesome, which is why I had Mihlali sleep at Saney's place. I drive to work, greet the receptionist, and meet Phila on my way to my office. The air is thick with an unspoken tension, emotions entangled in the mystery of Sino's unusual behavior.

"Mrs. Ntonga," I say.

"Mr. Langa. How did last night go?" she inquires.

I smile. "She loved it; we had sex everywhere doable."

She chuckles. "Remind me not to eat on your counter."

We both laugh, but I stop. "I don't know, but this morning she's been acting weird," I say as I open my office door.

"What do you mean? You just said she loved the surprise," she says, sitting down.

"I thought so too. Even when we woke up, she was fine. I don't know what happened. She lied and said Layla lost her mom or something," I explain.

Phila looks at me. "What makes you think she's lying?"

"Because Layla's mom died years back, three years ago to be exact. We attended the funeral together even," I say, and Phila looks at me, confused.

"Maybe it's something she can't tell you. I'm sure it's not that deep," she suggests.

I nod. "I hope so." We sit and catch up on work. After an hour or so, I get a call from my good old friend Malwande.

"Lwash," I say.

"Lunga, we have a problem," he says, sounding serious.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Your wife is here," he says.

"My wife? What's she doing there?" I'm shocked and worried. Why would she go to the police and not inform me?

"She has a video of you and a picture. It's bad, it's enough to have you arrested," he reveals.

I'm so shocked, words can't even describe. Where could she have gotten all this? I've been discreet about my affairs. The atmosphere is charged with the weight of unexpected revelations, emotions entangled in a web of uncertainty and fear.

"Handle it!" he says and ends the call.

"Is everything okay?" Phila asks, reminding me of her presence.

"Yeah, I have to be somewhere," I say, taking my blazer and putting it on. "Please lock up, okay?" I add, walking out. How am I going to handle this without having Lwando on my back? The air is thick with the weight of impending challenges, emotions entangled in a web of uncertainty and urgency.

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SINOKUHLE

I walk out of the station and find Saney talking on the phone; it sounds like she's talking to one of our parents. The atmosphere is filled with a sense of urgency and tension, emotions entangled in the web of unexpected events.

"She's here, Dad," she says and soon hands me the phone.

"Marhadebe," he says, making me smile.

"How are you, Dad?" I ask with a heavy sigh.

"Is everything OK?" I shake my head as though he can see me.

"Everything is a mess, Daddy. You were right about him. I'm so sorry I didn't believe you," I say, speaking really fast.

"Saney, go to work. Sino, come with me," says Steve behind me.

"Why? What's going on?" I ask.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Dad asks with concern.

"It's Steve," he breathes out with relief. "He's there to take you to safety. Don't fight him," Dad commands, and I nod, getting in my car as the passenger.

"Give Saney her phone; I'll keep in touch, OK?" he says, ending the call. I give the phone to Steve, who takes it to Saney, then drives off.

"Is there anything you need in your house?" he asks, focused on the road.

"I don't know, my second laptop," I say.

"Steve

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what's going on?" He sighs. The atmosphere is thick with tension, emotions entangled in a web of confusion and urgency.

"Your husband is more well-connected than you think. The officer you spoke to is his longtime friend. He won't even get arrested," Steve points out. I'm shaken, my hand clasping my mouth.

"How?" Just then, my phone rings, and it's Lunga.

"Should I answer him?" I ask because I really don't know what to do or say to him.

"Answer him." I take a couple of breaths in and let them out, then answer.

"Hey."

"Is that how we answer the phone now? Sino, did I do something to upset you?" he asks innocently.

I clear my throat. "I'm sorry, babe. Just that a lot has been on my mind this morning," I say.

"I'm coming over to your office with your favorite," he says.

"We'll talk proper when I get there, OK? I love you, Sinokuhle Langa," he says. I'm dumbstruck.

"I love you too, Sthandwa Sam," I say, then drop the call. We drive into my yard.

"You can't go in alone," Steve says.

"He's on his way to my workplace," I say, getting out.

"You don't know that!" he points out and takes Mihlali out. We walk to the door; he unlocks it, then walks in first to check the place out.

"You can come in," he says.

"I told you he wasn't home," I say, bored. "The laptop is in my room; stay here with Mihlali," I say and walk up to our room. It's empty, it's clean. I take a moment to take everything in. Where did I go wrong? Why would he abuse kids?

"You lied to me again," says a voice behind me.

"You always did suck at lying, babe," he says. I'm scared to turn, but I turn anyway.

"What are you doing here, babe?" he asks, walking towards me. I move back.

"I need my second laptop," I say. The atmosphere is charged with the weight of a looming confrontation, emotions entangled in a web of fear and uncertainty.

"Why? You're not leaving, are you?" I shake my head no.

"Good. Can I kiss my lovely wife?" he says, stepping closer. I've reached the pedestal. He places a hand on the back of my neck and pulls me in for a kiss. I feel a bee sting on my neck, and in a second or less, I'm out. The atmosphere is thick with an unsettling tension, emotions entangled in a web of danger and betrayal.

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LUNGA

I pick up Sino and place her in my car. Malwande drags Steve into his car and cuffs him.

"So what now?" he asks.

"Keep him in a cell until I figure shiit out," I say.

"And Sino?" he asks.

"I'll handle her. Get me a burner phone. Her father believes she's on the run; the least we could do is make him think they really are," I say, and then I strap my sleeping daughter into the car seat in Malwande's car.

"Have your nanny keep her for me; I'll fetch her later." The air is heavy with the weight of a complicated situation, emotions entangled in a web of secrecy and urgency.

He nods and gets in his car. I drive Sino's car into the garage, then drive off to my workplace. The only way to admit her is if she's convincing. I drug her with enough pills so that when Phila checks her blood, she'll admit her. Time to fake some tears. I walk into the hospital, tears streaming down my face, emotions entangled in the intricate dance of deception and manipulation.

"Somebody help me, please. It's my wife; I think she overdosed," I say, and a nurse runs to me.

"Mr. Langa," she says.

"Please, get her a bed. I can't lose her," I say.

"You won't, sir," she says confidently. A bed comes, and they rush her to the ER.

"Lunga, what happened?" I'm startled by Phila touching my shoulder.

"I found her in our room with these in her hand," I say, faking distraught. "These are dangerous. Why would Sino try and take her own life?" The atmosphere is charged with tension, emotions entangled in a web of fabricated despair and concern.

.....**The End**.....

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