



THE RING FIRE

INTRODUCTION

Every baby is born with their tiny hands folded. That, right inside that folded little

palm, is the gift the baby carries into this world. Not everyone gets married because not everyone is born gifted with marriage. Not everyone becomes a successful businessman too, because not everyone was born with that gift. We cannot all become healers, some of us weren't born with that gift. We all have different purposes in life, different journeys and footprints to leave behind. I swear to God, this world could have been a better place. Only if we didn't have people who interfere with other's lives. You can study hard, hustle until you sweat a storm, know people who know people in high places, but if someone is holding your gift and blessing in your life you'll never say; "keep the change," or "drinks on me". Sadly, people

**who block your blessings are never too far.
We usually stand in the ring of fire and dine
with the very same people who struck a
match.**

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**I was born for the glitz and glam. Luxurious
bags, overseas trips, bacon and eggs every
morning. Top Billing kind of mansion and
expensive cars. Lamborghini or nothing.
Bank balance that looks like a cellphone
number.**

**I worked hard at school, I always came top
in every subject, I was every teacher's
favorite student, you know the type that**

washes the teacher's lunchbox and takes her books to the staff room after class. I was charming as well, every boy wanted a piece of me, you know the "eat diamonds and shine all day" type. I was never too busy to be beautiful, I was 16, of course I got carried away and made a few mistakes. Well, maybe not a few, a lot of them actually, I have an 8 year old with no dad to prove it. But that- my son- didn't stop me from chasing my dreams. I left him with his grandmother, my mother, and went to University Of Cape Town. I may have been born in the township but that didn't limit me from dreaming big, out of the box of professions that were considered to be tickets to well-paying jobs. I'm not going to name names, you know teachers and

nurses and social workers. I went there and studied BSc in Biochemistry and Biology. My cousin, Salabenzi, settled for Elangeni College studying God knows what. From that name you must've already established that I come from a very dramatic family, they've always had constant feuds and they didn't hesitate to give their children names to send strong messages to one another. My father and his brother were at odds when Salo was born, it was just a week after they had a physical altercation. Apparently my father had gotten a massive ass-whooping and the clown that his brother was decided to name his daughter Salabenzi, meaning 'what did they do after I left'. Well, nothing, my father did nothing, he licked his wounds

and went back to his wife to create me. I was born a year later and guess who I am...let's attend to that later, shall we?

Moving on, five years later I had graduated, I was back in the province job-hunting between Pietermaritzburg, Durban and Richard's Bay. A cum-laude graduate like myself didn't have to draft CVs and show up for interviews, my academic record was too colorful, companies just needed to send me date and time to show up for work. But this world is not my oyster, it never was, I had to run from company to company begging pot-bellied managers wearing Identity shirts to take my CV. Time was running out, I had a son to feed and my

mother was getting impatient, people were asking; “Elizabeth when is your daughter going to start supporting you? Didn’t she graduate from Cape Town?” I had to make ends-meet for a short period of time- it has been 3 years now.

Luckily in Tongaat they had just opened a new company that manufactured wiring harnesses for the Auto Motive industry.

Salo was also struggling to get a job, she tagged along when I went there to drop my CV. There were a lot of applications, they were starting off and hiring everyday.

I was confident, very confident. My CV was juicer, thicker and colorful-ier inside. I had nothing to worry about, I sat at home and

patiently waited for the interview call. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months. Salo was already hired and in my head she got hired early because she was just a general worker and they were going to hire for my position probably at last. As dumped girlfriends would say when comforting themselves; one man's one trash is another one's treasure...something along those lines. Well, I was just making a quote, I wasn't any man's treasure unfortunately, every door closed on my face.

I had to be humble and lower my standards. I had to frame my degree and hang it on the wall next to my late father's

picture. It's called humble beginnings, sometimes you just have to start from the bottom to make it to the top. I haven't made it to the top though, I'm just saying- sometimes I'm a motivational speaker. I'm currently a cum-laude graduate employed at Shoprite, never make a mistake of leaving that 'cum laude' behind when addressing the kind of a graduate I am, it's a matter of life and death.

It's 6pm and I'm heading home, it's 20 minutes away from town. I've always looked down on VW cars but they're not that bad. I'm a Lamborghini kind of girl but the Polo Vivo is okay as well, it gets you from one point to another, that's better than walking. It's just not as fast as I want it to be. I'm watching it from the taxi

window, I'm the girl being scolded by the taxi driver for being R1 short. The Polo driving slowly in front of us belongs to Salo, they promoted her at work, she comes home every Fridays with her mother's groceries.

Life has proven me that there isn't always a light at the end of the tunnel. Being poor today doesn't mean you're being prepared for something big by God. Trust me, I know.

Oh fuck it!

"Eringin driver," I yell from the back.

He clicks his tongue first, he's still angry about the R1. So much drama, the taxi was coming this side anyway.

**"I want my money tomorrow
Nondumezulu."**

Oh well, the name, I prefer Nondu.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 1

The taxi drops me outside the gate, my son is already waiting for me and suddenly everyone inside the taxi is peeping through the windows and greeting him. Nzuzo is the star in the community, he's famous, everybody knows him. He was named by

my mother, she said she's naming him Nzuzo because one day he's going to become successful and give us everything we want. But I'm not stupid, here they don't just make names up like that, she named him Nzuzo because he was the profit I got from my 'hot girl' lifestyle. I love my son though, I believe most of the things I do now are for him, he's my whole world. Nzuzo was born with Autistic Disorder. He's only learning some words now at 8, he attends a special public school in Majuba Reserve, Ethel Mthiyane Special School. If it wasn't for the school I don't know what I would've done, he's an expensive child even with his education taken care of by the government. I think people love him for his mischievous behavior and because he's

a funny child. His deficient speech just adds the humor spice. He's very talkative when he wants to talk, and when he decides not to he's very moody. Today he's not in the mood, the taxi passengers are greeting him and he's not even lifting his head to look at them. Everyone understands him, the taxi driver who was scolding me not so long ago for R1 hands me the slab of chocolate and asks me to give Nzu- that's what everyone calls him.

I greet him, he doesn't respond to me either, he just walks in front of me with his hands inside the pockets of his trouser. I tell him about my day, he loves hearing about it, he thinks being a cashier is a cool job. I ask about his day at school and he just dashes inside the house and goes to his

room without uttering a word. Right. My mother is watching TV in her sleepers and gown, she still acts like a housewife even when her husband is dead and I'm the sole breadwinner. Sometimes I wish she can look for piece jobs and help me out, but then I'd remember the role she plays in raising Nzuzo up. I've never been too present in his life, I conceived him in Grade 11 and birthed him in early matric. Before he turned 1 I was leaving for varsity, after graduation I was job hunting and now I'm a cashier at the mall working 6 days a week. Since education is the key to success maybe I got the wrong one. Or is it rusty? Nzuzo's father is a subject I'd rather not indulge anyone on, for now. All I can say he's alive and kicking, doing pretty good in

his life; owning a chain of businesses and a gorgeous wife by his side whom he shares a daughter with. He didn't go to the tuck-shop to buy milk and never came back, nope. He pretty much denied his own sperm from the word-go.

I greet my mother and go to my room to change into my casual clothes then I go start on the pots. I'm making pap, cabbage and roasted chicken. Nzuzo loves chicken, I always hold long Roots queues for cheap packs of frozen chicken. Hopefully he'll talk to me after eating.

There's a knock at the door, I lift my eyes and it's my uncle, my father's brother Delani. He's younger than my father by two years, he moved out of the main house

when he got married and left my father behind. Unfortunately my father passed before I finished high school, he died after a short illness and Babomncane has filled in his shoes since then. He doesn't support us financially, not unless we ask him to, but he's been my father's eye since his death. He did not let the beef he had with my father drag on even after his death, the family reconciled. He's the man I now look up to as a father.

“Hey Babo, unonyawo oluhle yazi,” I say referring to him arriving just when I'm about to dish. I'm always happy to see him, he's one person who's never judged or put pressure on me for anything.

He walks in, “What can I say ndodakazi?
The aroma drew me all the way from
across the street.”

“Two pieces for the king, right?” I ask.

He chuckles, “You know your father, add
more pap on my plate.”

Yes, he can eat for Africa.

I dish up, Nzu is now standing in front of
me and trying to hack the pattern of my
phone. I ask him if he wants to help out. He
agrees, thank God the mood has improved.

There’s no dinner table to serve on, we
serve Ma and Babo on the couch. I join
them while Nzu eats on the floor, he’s
comfortable there.

“Nondu, your uncle has a request,” Ma says.

I look at Babo, he’s already dug into his plate and it doesn’t look like he even remembers that he wasn’t here for food.

When he lifts his eyes to me staring at him he laughs and blames it on the delicious cabbage. His wife feeds him a lot of fast foods, he eats like a hunter everytime he comes here and gets home-cooked meal.

“I was telling your mother that I’m doing a goat ceremony for the ancestors on Sunday before Salo leaves. But I cannot do it in my house, it has to be here,” he says.

“Is it not short notice? I mean, we cannot make umqombothi today and get it ready for Sunday,” I ask.

“Don’t worry about that, they already made umqombothi in my house, we can just present the goat and slaughter it here and then finish the rest of the ceremony in my house. They’re like one house since we both share one ancestors and alter,” he says.

It doesn’t make sense, I still believe we should have made umqombothi here where the slaughtering will be happening. But I get that it’s short notice and there’s nothing we can do about it now.

“Okay, is there anything you’d want us to help with except cleaning the houses and getting the pots and meat trays ready?” I ask.

“You said it all, you just prepare the place and pots!” He smiles and slides to his left hip to take out his wallet out his right pocket. Him and my father looked so much alike, sometimes it’s like I’m seeing another version of my father. Maybe a finer version of him, a bit darker than he was. Babo is one of those men who become more handsome as they grow and he advances it with a good taste in clothes. His wife does a great job taking care of him, I guess.

“Please take this and see what you can get,” he says giving my mother a couple of R200s.

“Are you sure Njomane?” Mom is going to cost us by this unnecessary modest. He’s

sure of what? The man is giving her money and she wants him to doubt his decision.

“Yebo sisi, do anything that needs to be done. Soap, dishcloths and whatever you’re going to need.” He turns to me with a warm smile and cocks up his eyebrow. He has something for me too?

Is this my lucky day? I recite a short prayer by heart and return the smile.

“I know you’re struggling, here is something for you and my grandson.” I count the money he’s given me and it’s R1800. Wow, I’m rich.

“Thank you Babo,” I kiss the money, a part of me wants to spray it on my face but I remember that I’m not on that level yet; these are just hand-outs.

I wake up the next morning looking forward to my Saturday. I'm going out with my son, I know I should be responsible and saving the money Babo gave me for rainy days. But one only lives once, I cannot deprive my son soft life for one day because of my financial problems, he much deserves it.

I cook porridge and serve him, my mother is still busy with her chickens outside. I plug water for his bath. I take a cold bath, I always prefer it over wasting electricity.

I put on my jeans and knee-length leather boots matched by a black jacket over my white T-shirt. Before I do my face and hair I need to pour water for Nzu before he

decides to do it himself. He can be very naughty and reckless.

“What are you going to wear?” I ask him as he strips his clothes off.

He hates being controlled, that just frustrates him, so I always try by all means to get his opinion before doing something. I also love giving him freedom to be who he wants to be, that’s the least I could do since I don’t have much to give him.

“My Spiderman T-shirt and...and my red short. I want my black shoes and vest.”

I nod, “You’re going to look amazing. Are you sure there’s no girlfriend you want to impress in town?”

He’s in stitches.

A small boy from our neighbor's house, Mvelo, runs in. I hope he's not here to play so early in the morning, you know how these kids can be.

"Hey Aunty, where's Nzu?"

Lord!

"He's taking a bath, we are going to the mall, you must come back to play later."

"No, I'm not here to visit Aunty, Mkhulu said give him R1."

I'm confused. Which Mkhulu? And since when do I give R1s randomly? I'm not Mother Teresa.

"Which Mkhulu?" I ask.

"Babo," he says.

Oh...But why would Babo need R1 from me? Is Salo suddenly broke?

“Okay, wait here.” I go to my room and check my purse, the only money I have is the R1800 he gave me yesterday. I go outside to my mother. He only needs R1, nothing much, maybe he wants to buy something and they don’t have the change at the local shop.

“Ma do you have R1?”

She frowns, “No, what do you want it for?”

“Babo wants it,” I say.

“I have the money he gave me yesterday and R10 that I got from MaMzimase.”

“R10 is fine, he will bring back the change,” I say.

We give Mvelo the R10, he runs to Babo's house across the street. A few minutes pass, he's sprinting out and making his way here again.

"Mkhulu says he wants R1," he says giving back the R10.

What's up with this man and R1? Yes we are broke but we don't have coins.

I try the last person, Nzu.

"Baby do you have R1?" I can imagine the mockery people could make out of us if we fail giving someone a mere R1.

Nzu runs to his room and comes back with his school backpack. He empties his pencil case, there's R1, finally! !

"I will pay you back baby, okay?"

He smiles and packs back his pens.

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I wanted us to go to McDonald's but the king said he wants the chicken street-wise two, so we are at KFC. We did some shopping, I got him shorts and a few toys, he's happy. As he grows older I'm getting more comfortable being out with him in public. His condition was never a problem for me, I accepted him as soon as I found out that he was different. The doctor told me autism is not an illness or disease, it's just that his mind works differently. He can have friends, he does have them, and he will find a girlfriend and work perfectly fine as he gets older. He just needs extra help

doing all that, someone to always be there and patient with him.

He doesn't throw tantrums like he used to when he was a toddler. He'd show me flames everytime we were in public, I remember this one time I almost got into trouble with a store manager after he kicked a shelf and broke over 5 plates.

He's walking around people's tables with his chicken. He can be very talkative, but when he chooses to be quiet you wouldn't recognize him. I stay on guard at my table while he entertains people and answers their questions.

Someone walks in with a group of young boys wearing soccer jerseys. It's the one and only Solwazi Dlomo, he goes over the

counter with his boys. He doesn't see me and I don't want him to because I don't trust what I would do to him if he dares breathes the same breath as me. I sit in my corner and watch him opening his wallet and paying for his order. He never struggled, he's one of those people who had their future paved by their parents. There was no way he wasn't going to make it in life with all the money his parents left him. But that's not the part I envy for my son the most, I don't care that much about Nzu having a father who gives him money, even though that would make his life much easier. But I wanted him to have both his mother and father, I know there's a role only a father can play in a child's life and Nzu deserves that love more than anyone.

They've never met, he said it wasn't his child right from the start and he made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with what I was carrying. Eight years later he hasn't regretted his decision, he's never reached out or done anything to show that he remembers being in a relationship with me for three months and sleeping with me without protection throughout the course of our relationship.

I may have zoned out while thinking about everything that this man put me through at 16 years old, when I snap out I see Nzu standing between a group of boys and the man whose DNA he carries brushing one of

the boy's head, not even looking at his direction.

I know I should let Nzu mingle whenever he wants to, but this time I'm getting off this seat and fetching my son. He has no idea who that man is, no idea!

I'm not fast enough, Nzu has grabbed him by his expensive suit and it looks like he's about to get a scolding of a lifetime.

“Nzuzo!” I yell.

He turns his eyes to me; he looks scared, maybe because of the tone of my voice.

I stand almost frozen as the sperm-donor's eyes meet mine. Nzu runs to me and wraps his arms around me. I lift him up but my eyes are still on his dead-alive father.

He's got a junior soccer club, this is his team, probably coming from a match. He's here to feed them, to splash his money on other people's kids, yet his own doesn't even have enough flash cards to help him improve his language.

He pulls the edges of his suit and looks at me again.

"Keep an eye on your child in public spaces," he says.

I feel tears burning my eyes but I don't let motherfuckers make me cry. No, not me, I don't cry.

"You can go fuck yourself!"

There are gasps around, how dare she insults the wealthy Solwazi? I collect my

**purse and give Nzuzo his shopping bags
and pull him out.**

**He looked that disgusted because a son
that his sperm created grabbed his suit?
Fuck Solwazi, fuck those chipmunks team
of his and KFC!**

**I'm shaking with anger crossing the road
and heading to the rank. How dare he looks
down on my son in front of his stupid
soccer team! Nzu talked to everyone inside
there, well almost everyone, nobody had a
problem with him being at their table. But
as soon as the motherfucker walks in I
should 'keep an eye on my child in public**

spaces.' Well, fuck the public spaces I'm going home.

There's a loud hoot coming from one of the parked cars on my left. It's loud and seemingly calling for my attention.

Turning my head I see a very displeased man coming towards us with an empty can of drink. Holy shit, Nzu threw that can with half content inside at this man's car window. Things like this happen, Nzu does them, but I do not need this shit right now!

"You need to keep an eye on your child in public spaces," he says as he gets closer.

I feel every hairy part of my body itching.

My anger goes from 80 to 100. If one more motherfucker tells me this I swear I will be sleeping in jail today.

“You don’t know me,” I say glaring at him.

He’s a beautiful idiot with thick eyebrows and caramel skin with a mustache connecting to his grown beard. He’s in a long black coat, black pants and boots. Handsome, but not too handsome to distract me.

“You don’t know me but your son just threw a drink on my car. You owe me an apology,” he says squashing the can in his hand like it’s a piece of paper.

Is that supposed to scare me? Trust me, I’ve seen worse.

“You’re not going to squash me, I’m not a can. I don’t owe you anything, he’s autistic and you’re freaking him out right now,” I say.

He looks at Nzu, there's some sympathy in his eyes. Then he turns to me, looking a bit calmer, or apologetic, I don't know.

"You can take some responsibility and say sorry," he says.

"Okay, I'm sorry I'm a powerless woman with a child she can't control in your private space, son will never throw a can on your expensive car ever again sir."

There, he has his apology!

I pull Nzu and walk away.

I regret that reaction as soon I get inside the taxi. Why am I taking my frustrations out on strangers? I have a problem with Solwazi, not every men in the country. I look around, there are still six empty seats.

“Baby do you mind if I go away for a few minutes?” I ask Nzu. I need to go and apologize to that man, he didn’t deserve that.

Nzu shakes his head. I have to ask twice to confirm. I leave him with my phone unlocked and rush back to where the man’s car was parked. He was right, I do owe him an apology. It was very low of me to use Nzuzo’s condition to avoid taking responsibility. Had I been keeping an eye on him he wouldn’t have thrown that can.

The parking space where the car was is now empty.

He’s left?

I look around, confused.

Then I see the white Ford Ranger driving away. My apology is late, he's already gone with an image of me I don't want anyone to have. I don't talk like that to people, I'm not an asshole like Solwazi, I take accountability for my actions. It's a company car- Banguni Construction. I guess that's where he works, as much as I wronged him I don't think I'll be hunting him down to give apology. I will just give the apology to God.

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I'm not in the best mood getting home but I don't want to burden my mother about it. She's healed from having a grandson who was denied, I don't want Solwazi to ever

become a part of our conversation again.

We are done, over him.

“Come and show Gogo what your mother bought you,” she’s talking to her grandson walking through the door.

Nzu is happy to show his new clothes and toys. But he wants to wear the clothes right now, I can put my foot down and tell him how that is not a good idea. But I don’t, I let him be. Mvelo is running in, it’s about to get crazy in here.

But he comes to me first and gives me R1. It’s from Mkhulu, he’s paying it back. This was not necessary, imagine if we start paying back all the money he’s ever given us too. But I know he’s stubborn, he will

insist on paying it back so I take it and return it back to the owner.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 2

I love last minute errands, maybe because I'm going with Salo, I don't have to stop stupid taxis and count the change. Babo says there's no enough alcohol, we only had one crate of beer because it's just a goat ceremony, but people keep pouring in. So we are going to the mall, this gives us

the opportunity to buy our own liquor and hide it in the car for later.

Salo and I do get along, we are not best friends or that close because she lives far from home and she has her own rich squad. But there's never been an issue whenever we meet, there has never been any bad blood between us even when we were growing up with two fathers who hated one another. We didn't interfere in elders feud.

“Guess who I saw yesterday?” I say.

We have joined the main road, driving to town.

“Buhle?” she asks.

I roll my eyes. “No, even if I saw that one I wouldn't have noticed.”

That's our common childhood enemy by the way.

"Who did you see then?" she asks.

"Solwazi. And guess what he did when Nzuzo grabbed his suit at KFC?" I'm calm now, I don't care about the motherfucker, he can go to hell.

"Oh gosh, did he see Nzu? What did he say? Did he look remorseful?" She needs to be slowing down. My imitating voice is ready. You got to speak like the person you're gossiping about to make it believable, that's the Mhlongo rule.

"Keep an eye on your child in public spaces," I say in Solwazi's hoarse voice.

Salo's eyes widen; she's in disbelief.

"He said that to you?"

I nod, “Yep.”

“Sis, I hope you told him where to go off.”

“I was dumbfounded, I wish I said more than just telling him to go fuck himself because I know he fucked his wife.”

She laughs, I’m laughing too.

“That was weak, we need to have an insult lesson. I might also have a babydaddy like him one day, I need to prepare my insults in advance.”

I look at her curiously. “Are you dating an asshole?”

“He’s not an asshole, for now. But you know men change, for instance your beloved Solwazi who used to pick you up from school with boxes of pizza and flowers,” she says.

I release a sigh thinking back to those days. Solwazi was once a man of every girl's dream but only I was living in it. I was 16, he was 27 at the time. I was lured by gifts and blinded by his love, I forgot the lessons my L.O teacher had given me. For someone who passed Life Orientation with distinctions every term it was very disappointing when I added to the stats of teenage pregnancy in schools.

We left guests at home, so we have to hurry, when we arrive at the mall we go straight to the liquor shop and buy another crate of beer and packs of ciders and two wine bottles. She's the one paying, so I'm pushing the trolley to be useful.

“I heard they might start hiring again in June at work, hopefully they’ll consider you this time,” she says to me randomly as we push through the crowd exiting the block of stores.

“I doubt, I think I have bad lucks, that’s it,” I’m hopeless. It’s been years since I graduated, there’s nothing I haven’t done right for me not to get even one good job. Something is wrong with me, not with the companies.

“Don’t say that, look at me, I was a failure throughout my childhood years, I completed my course at Elangeni after 5 years, literally I’m just dumb. But look where I am now, I’m a whole operating

manager in a big company driving my own car.”

“Babo was taking you to traditional healers, maybe that’s why your things brightened up,” I say.

She rolls her eyes, “I don’t believe in those, they were just milking his money. One said I will meet a rich man and get married before turning 25.”

I can’t help but laugh. Still, I think she has a chance of meeting that rich man now, not that she even needs a rich man in her life, she’s stable on her own.

“Maybe I should ask Babo to take me to a sangoma too,” I say.

She gives me a suspicious look. “What happened to praying to God? Look mntase, I also think you intimidate those in power.”

**“How so?” I ask with my brows snapped.
Me and intimidating?**

“You’re literally a genius. Imagine what your presence can do to big managers of the companies? Sometimes they don’t hire you simply because they’re intimidated by you.”

“Like they think I’ll be promoted and take their jobs once I’m in?”

“Yes, have you listened to yourself when you speak? You sound so fuckin’ intelligent, some people would be shaking and fearing for their positions.”

I release a deep sigh. I doubt that's true, if it is then it's not fair.

I stop the trolley and pass the crate to Salo to put in the car boot, as well as other booze packs. Then I drive the trolley back to the entrance where they stay. This is the only driving and parking experience I'll ever have in this life; parking a trolley. I'm careful doing it, I don't want to park wrongly, I make sure that it's parked the right way with others. I may have taken my sweet time, when I finish parking there's someone standing behind me waiting for me to move so that he can take one and do his shopping. One look and I recognize him

immediately, it's the man whose car was thrown with a can by Nzu yesterday.

“Are you done?” he asks.

I'm embarrassed thinking he was watching me changing gears, reversing and parking a mere trolley like it's a damn car. He must be thinking I grew up without enough toys.

“Yes, I'm done. I was just trying not to stress the trolley service boys and leave everything in order.” And why the hell are you explaining yourself Nondumezulu?

“You have a good heart,” he says and walks past me to pull the trolley. I can't help but feel that his statement is not genuine at all. He still remembers me from yesterday's incident, I wasn't.

I'm still standing, he's wiping the trolley handles.

"Ummm, sorry about yesterday, I shouldn't have spoken to you that way, my son wronged you," I say.

"Mmmm, thanks." He doesn't buy it, he's not even looking at me.

"I came back to apologize but you were leaving," I say.

He wipes his hands and now looks at me. I look away immediately.

"I'm sure you did," he says.

I take a deep breath and sum up courage to look at him. Today he's wearing green working uniform with the same company name; Banguni Construction.

“I really did, I even noted your company name and car registration number so that I can apologize if ever see you again,” I say.

This time it looks like he believes me.

“I’m not angry about it,” he says.

“But still, I owe you an apology.”

He nods, we are now standing side to side and by the strong smell of his cologne and uniform's spotlessness I can tell he wasn't doing any construction hard labor. Maybe he's not a general worker.

“Where's your son?”

“He's home,” my answer is a bit too quick.

“I didn't mean to scare him,” he says with a pinch of remorse.

I crack a smile to put him at ease. “He’s fine, he’s already forgotten about it.”

“When are you coming with him to the mall again?”

This is an odd question. Why does he want to know? I can’t tell strangers my moves, especially if my son is involved.

“I would like to meet him again, if that’s okay with you.”

“Why?” I ask.

“I don’t know.”

Okay, this is funny and strange at the same time.

“I also don’t know when I will be coming with him to the mall.”

“Alright,” he sends his hand to his top pocket and comes back with a wallet from it he pulls R50. “Please buy him something and tell him it’s from me, the uncle who shouted at him, tell him I said I’m sorry.”

What? No, no.

“You didn’t shout at him. You talked to me as his mother and I was the one who blew it out of proportion,” I say.

“No, I understand what you meant when you said I was scaring him because he did look scared. For that I’m sorry,” he says forcing the money into my hand.

“Okay, thank you.” There’s no point in me acting like Nzu won’t benefit from this money. I’ve been praying for lucks and this

is one of them but I'm now challenging my ancestors.

"From Nkalipho," he says with a kind smile.

Nzu will be so happy. I can't believe I was nasty to this kind-looking man.

"His name is Nzuzo Mhlongo, thank you very much."

Salo is standing outside the car staring at me as I make my way back.

"Who is that?" she asks.

I glance back and catches the green uniform before he disappears.

"Someone I snapped at yesterday," I tell her.

“And...?”

“And nothing Salo, we had a misunderstanding and we both felt bad about it, now we have bumped into each other again and sorted it out.”

She gives me a suspicious look accompanied by a wide grin.

I get inside the car and take a deep breath. I wasn't looking for him but I'm glad we met again. He's a good person, in both personality and looks. Salo gets inside and takes her seat, she's still looking at me.

“What?” I ask with a frown.

“What's his name?”

My eyes widen; she thinks me and him have something going. Gosh, he's good

looking and all that but I'm not looking for a relationship. I'm sure he is not either.

"You need to calm down," I say.

She laughs. "Okay, I'll wait until you're ready."

I roll my eyes, she's really convinced that I'm hiding something from her.

We get home, everyone looks busy, which gives us plenty time to hide our alcohol and only present the crate of beer. Ma tells me to mix the dough, Salo sits with the guests and does nothing. Benefits of having money! I'm not complaining though, I didn't contribute anything towards the ceremony, I might as well mix doughs and do all the kitchen labor. So Babo has been

having dreams, bad ones, concerning his grandfather, he's here today with the goat to appease to him. Apparently there's a ceremony required that my father skipped, now the old man is not pleased with Babo.

“Mommy!” Nzu runs inside the kitchen, I'm sure he just noticed now that I've come back.

He's wearing the Spiderman T-shirt that he wore yesterday to the mall, I had to wash it in the morning because it was it or nothing.

“Hey baby, did you see the goat?”

“Yeaah! Mkhulu cut the head with a knife.”

He looks very happy about the slaughtering part. Animal cruelty, SMH.

“You're going to eat the goat meat?” I ask.

“Yes!”

I laugh, he’s in a good mood, which automatically puts me in one as well.

“Mommy you know the goat is eighteen hundred?”

I pretend to be confused. Wait, I’m really confused.

“How?” I ask.

“Its mother gave it the name; eighteen hundred.”

“How do you know?”

“I know because its mother wrote on her skin,” he says. Before I can say anything he’s called me again. “Mommy why do goats have number names?”

Lord forgive me, I’m not sure I get this one.

“Ummm...because goat mothers love number names.”

Well, he’s confused.

“Like eighteen hundred?” he asks.

This is what motherhood looks like, just a glimpse of it.

“What is eighteen hundred?” I ask filling a bowl with water to wash the flour from my hands.

“One eight and zero zero,” he says.

“That’s one thousand and eight hundred, not eighteen hundred.” We’ve had this Maths talk so many times before.

“One thousand and eight hundred?” He gets it right right away. I’m super proud.

“Yea baby, so the goat had 1800?” I ask.

“Yes, Mkhulu said it’s the goat’s name.”

I laugh, “No, that’s the price of the goat. You know sometimes goat sellers write their prices on their skins so that they don’t forget and sell with the wrong price and get into trouble with the farmer.”

I’m making this up, I don’t know why they write goat prices like that. This is one expensive goat, R1800? I hope it was fat, ribs are my favorite part. This just proves that Babo doesn’t have money problems, yesterday he gave me the exact amount of money he bought a goat with. 1800, maybe that’s my lucky number.

“Okay, so what’s the goat’s name then?”

Phewww!

“I will ask Gogo,” I say.

He's not happy with my unintelligence, you can tell from that look on his face. I should tell him about his parcel from Nkalipho, maybe he will forget about baby names.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 3

Babo leaves as soon as the last round of local uncles leave after emptying all the calabashes. It's around 6pm, everyone is tired. All I want to do is give Nzu a bath and jump into my bed. Don't tell me about

my own bath, I did not fall at anytime today and I did take a bath after cooking the goat's stomach.

Ma walks in with another pile of dishes, she dumps them inside an empty bucket.

“We will see the dishes tomorrow. What time are you going to work?”

“Nine,” I say.

“Okay, we will wake up early.”

I'm tempted to call her lazy ass out. Her and waking up early in one sentence? My mother was meant to be a rich housewife with maids running around and money rolling in without her lifting a finger. It's tough in this household, especially since Nzu's grant and my little wage is the only source of income that we have. I've been

thinking about taking her to SASSA to fake any illness that could qualify her for disability grant. I know it's corruption, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I'm still trying to get the right connections, one needs to bribe a doctor to get the patient file and letter referring her to SASSA.

Nzu finally comes out of his room ready to take a bath. I don't always bath him, sometimes I just watch and coach him, he's growing and learning to be independent.

“Do you want me to wash you?” Please say no!

He nods, “Yes.”

Phewww! I take his towel and put soap on it while he gets inside the basin and sits. He's outgrown it, I need to buy a bigger one.

"Did you have fun today?" I ask.

"No," he says.

Well, it looked like he was having fun when his friends were here and every local uncle hovering over him and asking him to dance.

"What happened? Why didn't you have fun?" I ask.

He doesn't answer.

I haven't told him about his money.

"Do you remember the uncle of the car you threw a can at? Well, I saw him again and

he said he's sorry for shouting at us and gave me R50 to give to you."

"R50?" he asks.

"Yep, five ten rands. What are you going to buy with it?"

"A goat," he says.

I laugh at the little aspiring farmer.

"Really? A goat, why do you want a goat?"

"Because it has meat," he says.

Little carnivore!

"Mommy," he calls me.

Here comes the rain of goat questions!

"Yes baby."

"If the leaves are dry Mkhulu takes them.

Why?"

“What leaves?” I ask.

He points at the roof.

**I’m not always understanding him,
especially if he doesn’t even try to
articulate what he wants to say. I think he’s
talking about the plants they cut to create a
temporary kraal at the end of the yard
before slaughtering the goat.**

“Because dry leaves cause dirt,” I tell him.

**He wipes water from his face and turns to
look at me. One thing God blessed me with
was giving me a son who looks exactly like
me. From the slim face, to the chestnut
skintone and concave nose, he’s just me.
He took nothing from Solwazi, that’s one
thing I’m thankful for; I don’t have to see
him in my son everyday.**

“But Gogo loves them,” he argues.

**I don’t remember my mother being
obsessed with plants and leaves, but if Nzu
says she loves them then she loves them.**

**They know each other better than I do,
they spend more time with each other.**

**“Okay baby, let’s forget about leaves and
get out of the water before you catch cold.”**

**He stands up, I squeeze water from the
towel and wipe his body.**

**He’s lucky to be my son because even
though I don’t afford expensive skincare
products with the little that I have I make
sure we always have our body lotions and
other cosmetics. His skin is good as mine;
flawless and always glowing. The trick is to**

add baby oil into his lotion and glycerine into mine, and make sure the skin is dry before applying it generously.

I put him in his pyjamas and then in front of the mirror.

“How do you look?” I ask. My mother always talk me against beautifying a ‘man in making’. She says I give him too much mirror time, which is too feminine.

“Handsome,” he says smiling at his reflection.

I give him a hug and lift him up and take him to his bed.

“Yes, you’re handsome baby. Now be a sleeping beauty,” I say.

He sits up on the bed and asks, “Where’s my money?”

“Seriously Nzuzo? It’s not going to multiply because you’re sleeping with it under the pillow,” I say.

I’m too exhausted to be making trips between our bedrooms to get his R50. But he doesn’t care, he opens his hands; he wants it.

I wake up at 6 am to get Nzu ready for school, his school is about 10 minutes away, he can walk there but I prefer him not to. My neighbor who works at the same school goes with him and I pay R150 monthly for petrol. He’s ready by 7 am, he’s doing Grade 1, so far I’m happy with his progress.

I see him out of the gate and come back to the pile of yesterday's dishes, pots and trays. I'm not unfamiliar with domestic work, it doesn't take an hour for me to finish washing everything and packing dishes inside the cupboard.

Ma comes in, still in her sleeping gown.

"You're already done?" The shock in her voice is almost genuine.

"It's 8:10 Ma," I say.

She yawns, "I overslept, I'm sorry."

"Never mind, yesterday was busy." I push the two big pots on top of the cupboard and fill the 5l bucket with water and soap to soak dirty dishcloths.

"So Ma, I've been thinking," I say.

She's plugging water, probably for tea.

"I think we should raise money to bribe a doctor so that you can fake illness and apply for disability grant," I say.

"Whaaaat?!"

"It will make a difference if you have something coming in too."

She shakes her head, visibly disappointed.

"You know that's fraud and people go to jail for it. What is wrong with you? The effort you want to put into bribing doctors you can put into bribing companies that could hire you."

"If I had connections I would've done that long time ago," I say.

I'm actually offended by her response, if it was that easy I would've done it a long time ago. They'll want large sums of money that I don't have, or even something more than money.

"No, I don't agree with that. I'm too old to be going to jail for fraud. I'm going to be 60 in a few years, I will wait until I qualify for old-age grant."

Few years? She's yet to turn 50, that's like a decade away.

"Okay," I say with a slight shrug.

I leave for work twenty minutes early, I always walk if I'm not in the opening shift, it saves me money to take a taxi after work when I'm tired. I know all the short-cuts

around the township, in no time I'm already walking past the police station.

The white Ford Ranger stops next to me, there's a group of men in green uniforms at the back wearing white safety helmets. I know this car, I see the company name, but why is it stopping next to me?

The window rolls down, a man I don't know tells me to go to the passenger door. I'm getting a lift, these are my ancestors coming through for me, but I'm nervous because I don't recognize anyone I know among these men.

I walk around to the other door, I'm on high kidnap-alert, this is South Africa, but I'm also putting my trust in God and my ancestors.

The door opens immediately when I get closer to it. Guess who climbs out? I shouldn't be shocked because this is the car that introduced me to him, if that's a way to put it. He gives me a little wave and rushes to join the group at the back. So he's giving up his seat at the front and going to the roofless back in this cold weather for me. Can anyone be this kind for no reason?

The man on the steering wheel looks old when I'm closer to him. He's grey-haired, even though he's muscular as they come you can still tell he's approaching his retirement age. He's not wearing the green uniform like others, he's wearing a white shirt with two top buttons undone.

“Are you good ndodakazi?” Damn, his voice is deep.

“I’m good,” I say.

“You work at the mall or plaza?”

“At the mall,” I say.

“Okay, I will drop you at the robots because we are late.”

That’s outside the mall, I can’t be more grateful for this lift. I’m embarrassed whenever I think of how things went down when I first saw Nkalipho. Ever heard of the saying; kill them with kindness? That’s his motto, I guess.

“Are you friends with my son?” the man asks as we drive past KwaNkoko

I almost choke on my saliva. This is his father? Why didn't I match their faces? He's old but I can see Nkalipho in him.

“Ndodakazi?”

Oh snap!

“No baba, we are not friends. I just know him from one random encounter. No, two encounters,” I say.

“Oh, okay,” he says.

This is super awkward. Like he told his father to stop and lift me while transporting workers to work? I don't know what to think of that.

He stops me after the robots, I say an awkward loud 'thank you', I don't know why I'm suddenly uncomfortable.

“Okay ndodakazi, have a great day at work,” he says.

“You too baba, thanks,” I close the door.

They drive off, I don’t get a chance to thank Nkalipho as well.

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SALO

She’s the first born daughter from her parents, there’s another girl, 15, who comes after her followed by a boy, 13. Both her younger siblings are at the boarding school; benefits of having a financial stable sister.

Things did turn for the best for Salo, she was once that girl in the township who didn't have a promising future. Most thought she'd end up in the factories, nobody expected an operational manager making six figures annually from her . Her mother cannot be more proud of her princess. Her mother, Busisekile Khumalo, married Delani Mhlongo when he was nothing but a doormat of his late brother. Times used to be tough, until she wised up and turned things around for her family.

She walks into Salo packing her lunchbox, she couldn't drive back to Tongaat yesterday because the ceremony ended late, she's rushing to work now.

“Did you eat the pancakes I made you?”
she asks, this is with no doubt her favourite child. Not that she loves the younger ones less, Salo holds a special place in her heart for all the sacrifices she’s made for this family.

“I packed them, I will eat at work,” Salo says. She’s not a fan of pancakes anymore, she’s outgrown them but obviously Busisekile is still holding on to the old Salo.

“How was your trip with Nondumezulu?”

Salo frowns, **“What trip?”**

“Yesterday when your father sent you to buy alcohol with her,” she says.

“Oh, it was good,” Salo says filling a bottle with icy water.

“I worry about her, she doesn’t seem to have any progress in life, which is bizarre because she’s a smart girl,” Busisekile says eyeing her curiously.

Salo exhales heavily because she’s been thinking about that too after the conversation she had with Nondu.

“She thinks it’s bad lucks, she wants to seek from a sangoma, she thinks it could help because Baba used to take me to them before I had my breakthrough,” she says.

Busisekile coughs and reaches for a glass of water.

“Really?” she asks.

Salo nods and takes a sip of her water before closing the lid.

“But I told her they might start hiring at work, I’m pretty sure they’ll take her this time.”

“Hha, that’s risky!” Busisekile says with her pupils dilating. This child wants to destroy everything her and Delani have built for this family.

“What do you mean Ma? She’s not going to come for my position, they’re hiring for other positions,” Salo asks.

“You trust people too much.”

Salo gives her a look, “It’s my cousin, not ‘people’.”

“Hurry up, you’re going to be late talking about cousins who used to outshine everyone. I don’t know why you are bothering yourself, this person went to

study in Cape Town while you went to Newcastle.”

Salo knows her mother, she overthinks and reads too much into things. One thing that her and Nondu have been mastering since childhood is to blue-tick any feud between the elders. This has nothing to do with Nondu actually, her mother is just taking out her frustrations on her.

She takes her bags, bids goodbye and leaves.

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Busisekile enters the bedroom where her husband is with a tray of breakfast. She's not in the good mood she was in when she

left the bedroom to make pancakes for Salo. She drops the tray on the bedside cabinet and sits next to her husband.

“Your daughter wants to go to a sangoma,” she says.

Delani frowns, “Nondumezulu? For what?”

“She thinks she has bad lucks.”

Delani sits with a slight frown on his face.

“When does she plan to do that?”

“How do you expect Busisekile to know? I heard this from Salo, I couldn’t ask too many questions because she will suspect something.”

Delani sighs heavily.

“How do we stop her?”

“I don’t know Delani, but we cannot afford any mistake now, not after executing yesterday’s ceremony so perfectly.”

He nods, looking thoughtfully. Yesterday they successfully fetched his late brother’s spirit and brought him here. The good part is, Nondu helped them bring him here-without knowing. Since she couldn’t afford the goat to perform the ceremony of transferring her father to her Babo’s house, to work in their favor as an ancestor, Delani made things easy for her by buying the goat on her behalf and all she did was to open the way with an offering of silver money. When he left after the ceremony he left with his brother’s leaf from their alter, which he replaced with another one.

It was a clean job, when he got here he burnt impepho and told his brother that he's here now, this is where his spirit rests, so in whatever he does as an ancestor he should protect their alter and bring them good lucks.

“You know there's something called ukusitha, Mkhulu Makhanda does it,” Delani says after a moment.

Busisekile's pursed lips stretch into a smile. Now this is the man she married; a man with a plan.

“What exactly is this ukusitha?” she asks.

“Veiling yourself with someone else's shadow, so no matter where she goes to seek instead of that sangoma seeing our

faces she will see whoever we put as our shadow.”

Busisekile nods, looking very pleased and hopeful.

“But the question is, who do we put as our shadow?”- Delani.

That's very easy, Busisekile thinks for a second. “How about her mother’s sister who usually comes to visit? I feel like she’s a better option, it’s not abnormal to have your aunty bewitching you.”

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 4

You know when you feel anxious for no reason, that's how I've been feeling since I came back from my tea-break. The store is empty, I'm feeling drowsy and tempted to close my eyes and drift to sleep right here on the counter.

Someone drops a shopping basket, I immediately lift my head and look at him. I don't know why I'm smiling, these are just too many encounters. Yes, it's Nkalipho. He empties his items from the basket, I pull them closer and scan them. Two full roasted chickens and three packets of rolls and two cold 2Ls of cold drink. Construction workers menu.

“Buying for the team?” I ask, it’s not part of my job to ask questions, I’m just trying not to be awkward.

“Yes,” he says with a chuckle.

“You’re kind. Thanks for the lift in the morning, your father is kind too.”

“You’re welcome,” he’s paying cash.

I count it with trembling hands, I don’t know why I’m feeling so uncomfortable with him staring at me. Customers stare at cashiers all the time, right?

“How’s Nzuzo?” he asks.

“He’s fine,” I say.

“He’s at school?”

“Yeah, he’s doing Grade 1.”

He nods, his eyes lock into mine for five seconds then he looks away. Today it looks like he's been doing some work, his sleeves are dusty, in a very sexy way. It's crazy to even think a dusty working uniform can suit someone so well.

I give him his change and receipt, he pushes the coins into his trouser's back pocket and slides notes in his black wallet.

Nondu stop staring! I pull the cloth and wipe the counter for the next customer.

Well, he's still here.

“My brother is in Grade 3, they're around the same age, maybe they can link up for games one Saturday,” he says.

I'm stuck on him having a brother who's around Nzuzo's age. I don't get it, his father

looked old, I doubt he's younger than 50.

He still shoots active sperms?

"My stepmother is still young," he says.

Oh Jesu, did I look visibly curious?

"Yeah, they can hang out one Sartuday," I say without giving it much thought.

If he has an 8 year old brother, as tall as he is, then...you know what, never mind.

"Thank you for shopping with us, have a nice day." I don't know when was the last time I used this line to a customer, I'm rarely friendly, I just do what I get paid to do and pray for hours to turn into minutes so that I can go home.

"Have a nice day too Nondumezulu," he says before walking away.

My eyes are bulging out of their sockets. I don't remember telling him my name, I only told him Nzuzo's because he happened to be the subject of our conversation.

"He read it on the receipt," Enhle, the packer working with me today, says.

Obviously, duh. How else could he have known my name? I read too many novels. My eyes follow him to the exit door. We've been bumping into each other three days in a row now, what a pleasant coincidence!

"His father was just a scaffolder when Sibusisiwe Hall was built but now he owns a whole freaking construction company.

This is the shit our parents should've done to make our lives easy. I mean, look at

him!” Enhle has a pretty smart mouth, most of the times I’m not interested in her little rants, she’s unhappy more than anyone working here.

But today I’m curious.

“You know them?” I ask.

“Yes, my cousin used to work at their house in Padianager, cleaning after them and washing their clothes for R4.5k,” she says.

“That’s so much money, I would have wiped their walls and roofs as well.” We both laugh, the next customer is here.

So I know a few things about Nkalipho now; his father owns a construction company, they live in Padianager and there’s an 8 year old brother. Him and his

father are down to earth. Now I only have one question; how young is the young stepmother?

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BUSISEKILE

They have a plan in motion, now they only need the picture of Nondu's aunt before Delani goes to Mkhulu Makhanda. That's their dilemma for now, they can't just go to MaNkosi or Nondu and ask for the picture.

Delani is in the lounge watching TV, she's fixing him lunch and trying to figure out how they're going to get hold of the needed

picture. Her hand goes under her blouse, she retrieves a small sachet of powder and pours some into the liver she's cooking for Delani. It's not witchcraft, she's just ensuring that they're always on the same page, men can be very weak and unpredictable. She got this man to be who he is today through sweat and many trips to traditional healers. He wasn't always like this, he had no backbone, he was weak and putting everyone's needs before his own, hence his late brother used to step on him like a doormat. They've had their breakthrough but she still needs him to be on her side. Morals don't pay bills.

She dishes up and adds red chillies and salt at the side, just the way he likes it. Delani's face lights up when he sees her walking in with a steaming plate of food.

“Mzilikazi wami,” he adjusts on his seat.

Busisekile smiles and sits next to him.

“I think I have an idea,” she says.

Delani is choking on the chillies and liver, he gulps down a glass of water and looks at her. “What did you think of?”

“Remember we took pictures at our anniversary party last year and MaNkosi was among our guests with her sister Thembelihle, there's definitely a picture of her in Salo's phone,” she says.

“You have a point, but how do we ask for the pictures from Salo? You know how our

daughter is, she'll demand an explanation,"
– Delani.

Busisekile shakes her head looking very disappointed. She reaches to the TV stand and disconnects his phone from the charger and scrolls down to Salo's number.

She hates being called while she's at work unless if it's urgent, but this time she'll have to deal. She answers in a hushed voice after a few rings.

"Hello baba,"

"Hello sisi, it's your mother here."

"Ma, what's going on?"

"Your father needs all the pictures from our anniversary party last year."

Delani coughs, “Whaaat? Why are you saying...”

She gives him a look- STFU.

“I’m at work Ma, what’s so urgent about the pictures? You have some in the photo album at home,” Salo says, very displeased.

“We can’t find the album, I think your sister left with it. Send them to my Whatsapp, hurry baby!”

A sigh!

“Okay,” she drops the call.

Busisekile turns to her husband with a cheerful face.

“Sorted! You just need to drive to town before going to Mkhulu Makhanda, there’s

a place that prints pictures from the memory card,” she says.

“You’re a mastermind, hey!” Delani compliments with a flattering smile.

“That’s why you need me by your side.”

“And on top of me too,” Delani says, his eyes flitting with playfulness.

She smiles and looks away blushing like a newly-wed. They have a lot of privacy with all the kids gone, which gives them time and space to experiment things they never did when they were younger.

“Are you going to ride me tonight?” Delani asks with his voice lowered and stare fixed on her.

“It will depend,” she says.

“On what?” He raises his eyebrow.

“You know what I like Njomane,” she stands up and turns around to leave.

Delani’s hand connects to her butt in a light spank, she chuckles and quickly moves away when he grabs her big butt. Not now, he will have this after supper.

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NONDUMEZULU

Coming home to the pots colliding in the kitchen is strange to me. I just know Ma either has a guest she wants to impress or someone else is in the kitchen. And indeed

I'm walking into Aunt Teekay- as we call her. She's Thembelihle Nkosi, my mother's young sister. My mood improves instantly, I almost scream at the door, it's been three months since she came to visit us.

"Please don't scream and give me headache," she says.

I laugh and engulf her in a tight hug from behind.

"Aunty, when did you get here?" I ask.

"About an hour ago and I had to start cooking because there was no food in this house." She's pretending not to like doing this but the truth is, she loves being in the kitchen and doing domestic work more than anything.

“Aw shame, if you told us you were coming we would’ve left some food for you because you don’t like bread,” I say.

“It’s fine, I have cooked, you can change and come eat. How was your day at work?”

I roll my eyes and drag my feet walking away.

“You need to be grateful Nondumezulu, you know there are thousand of unemployed youth who’d kill to work at Shoprite like you.” She’s always like this; preaching positivity even when there’s none.

My legs please carry me and make me disappear quickly!

I change into my leggings and T-shirt and go to my mother's bedroom to greet. She's with Nzuzo ironing his school shirts. Now that her sister is here she's going to live a full potato-couch life.

"How was school baby?" I ask Nzu.

"Good," he says.

"What did you learn?"

"Numbers and fruit words."

I ask him to take me through the words he learned and he's more than happy to fetch his book and teach me everything he learnt at school. I'm still hungry, we'll do more once I've eaten.

I go to Aunt Teekay in the kitchen, she's already dished up for me. Whenever she's around I pray for her visit to keep

extending because she doesn't allow anyone to lift a finger.

“Eat fast and collect your laundry. I know your baskets are full of dirty clothes, children of today!” She's saying this taking everything out of the refrigerator. I'm not even going to lie, the last time this refrigerator was washed it was when she was here, three months ago.

“Look at this fridge, there's ice everywhere!” she mumbles.

I focus on my chicken stew. It's so delicious, I'm licking my fingers.

“Knock, knock layikhaya!” Someone is at the door.

I hate people who walk into me eating, food is expensive.

Luckily it's Mam' Busie, I doubt she still eats this kind of stew.

She walks in, "My eyes weren't deceiving me MaNkosi, you're here indeed."

Aunt Teekay puts the bucket with our frozen meat on the table and wipes her hands.

"It's been a long time, pull the chair and sit. Yoh, awusemuhle ntombi kaKhumalo!"

"The credit goes to Njomane, let's not go into details MaNkosi there's a child here."

They both crack up and laugh. I'm tempted to roll my eyes, I know what the details are. Dicktamins, obviously.

“Sorry you are finding me busy, everything is a mess here. You know my brother-in-law spoiled my sister, now if Nondu doesn’t do anything nothing gets done.” My aunt has always been blunt, she’s the complete opposite of what her sister is.

Mam’ Busie laughs, “That’s how the Mhlongo men are, even mine doesn’t allow me to move a lot around the house, he asks me to save my energy for later.”

They’re laughing again.

God help me not become obsessed with dicktamin in my late 40s, it’s gross.

“Let me throw this outside,” Aunt Teekay says taking out dirt.

Mam' Busie and I are not close. There's no animosity between us, we just lack connection, even when I was growing up I never gravitated towards her as a mother figure at the Mhlongo premises. My mother is not coming out of her room to attend her sisterwife, she's probably here to visit her, which happens once in a full moon.

"Your aunt is funny Nondu but you shouldn't let her talk like that about your mother," she says, so randomly.

This is very strange. She was laughing with Aunt Teekay just a minute ago. I know it may have sounded like Aunt Teekay was gossiping about my mother being lazy but both me and my mother know how blunt

she is. Trust me, she's told my mother this to her face a million times.

“Unmarried siblings tend to be jealous of the married ones, trust me I know. I know one who almost killed her own married sister because of jealousy,” she says.

“No Ma, she was just kidding, that's how she is.” I can't believe we are having this conversation behind my aunt's back, I feel even more bad because I know why she decided she was never going to enter in any marriage. She cannot have kids, she knew this since she was 18 and accepted it as her fate. Her comments about my mother or me have nothing to do with her situation.

“Let me tell my mother that you are here.”
I fill my glass with water and leave the

**kitchen before Aunt Teekay walks in and
thinks I'm gossiping about her.**

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#Narrated

**Thembelihle walks in after Nondu has
abandoned their guest**

“She’s left you alone?”

**Busisekile chuckles, “You know what these
kids think of us; old boring people. Even
Salabenzi, she never sits with me in the
room for more than 10 minutes.”**

“They have been spoiled by social networks, they spend more time with strangers online than their families.”

“You’re right MaNkosi, these kids are spoiled by social networks too much. We had a ceremony here over the weekend and they were busy on their phones, not even helping. I’m sure the hut hasn’t been cleaned even now, calabashes and meat bones are still lying on the floor.”

“Yeah, with Nondu waking up and going to work, I doubt anyone cleaned.”

Busisekile looks at her with her head tilted to the side. This woman was brought here by the ancestors.

“If you don’t clean there today, trust me tomorrow that hut will be smelling like a

dead rat, even the ancestors will run away,” she says.

“You’re right MaKhumalo, I will clean there now and then come back to do this girl’s laundry, she works too hard.”

Thembelihle takes a broom behind the door. She’s always been free to move around as she wishes in her sister’s house, even when Mhlongo was still alive. They treated her like she was part of the family. Of course she’s not going to go anywhere near their altar, she’ll just clean around.

Nondu’s mother finally comes out of her bedroom to attend her sisterwife. Nzu is behind her with his drawing book and coloring pens.

**“I’m sorry to keep you waiting
MaKhumalo, I thought my sister was
keeping you company,” she says looking
around.**

Busisekile exhales heavily.

“She just left to clean the ancestral hut.”

**“Oh, never mind her, she has an itchy butt.
She never sit still, she’s always moving
around.”**

**“People like her are good to have around.
She even clean people’s ancestral huts. I
wish my sister was like her but ewu, our
siblings are the ones stabbing us at the
back nowadays.”**

**“Don’t tell me you and Ntombenhle are
fighting!” MaNkosi says as she fills the
kettle with water for tea.**

“I’d rather trust a stone than to trust a human being,” she says.

“You don’t say!”

“I’m telling you MaNkosi!”

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 5

For me Fridays are like any other day of the week because there’s nothing spontaneous that I do. This one is even worse because tomorrow I’m working, there’s no ‘weekend vibe’ for me. I’m just thankful that Aunt

Teekay is still around, I come home to a warm meal and clean kitchen. She even does my laundry and wakes up every morning before me to iron my uniform and pack my lunch. If she had a child that child would've been spoiled, she's a blessing to have.

I buy some kitchen necessities and Nzu's favourite chocolate after my shift. It's 3:40pm, still early, I could just walk home but I'll catch a taxi because I'm tired.

I'm dragging myself out of the store, I don't realize that my lazy walk is slowing those who are behind me, until someone clears his throat. I move to the side before turning my head to look at him.

No ways! He's stalking me.

"Hi," I say in a shaky voice, my feelings are all over the place.

"Do you need help?"

I look at the shopping bags weighing my arms down, yes I do need help.

"No, I'm good," I say stubbornly.

"Okay, do you need a lift home?" God has sent me an angel again.

"I'm going to take a taxi but thank you for the offer," I say and feel a sharp ache on my back. The taxi rank is fuckin' too far.

"I've been waiting for you to knock off," he says.

Okay, that does warm my cold heart.

“Why?” I ask, we are still walking towards the mall’s exit.

“I spoke to my stepmother about the playdate, I want us to finalize that,” he says.

I don’t even know why I agreed to that without talking to Nzuzo first, I don’t know the child or the mother, he might not be comfortable with them.

We are on the pavement next to the ATMs about to cross the road when he slowly grabs the two shopping bags from my hands.

“My car is that side,” he points across the ATMs.

I follow him, I wasn't refusing the lift by the way, I was just being a girl. I'm broke, not desperate.

He's not driving the company Ford Ranger today, he's loading my shopping bags at the back of the Hyundai Creta. Then he opens the passenger door for me, I glance at him and catch him staring at my face but he looks away in a second. I don't know if he's not comfortable with eye contact or it's just me he doesn't want to lock eyes with.

I really don't know what to do with myself; sit and look outside the window or play with my phone. Which one is less rude when you're sitting next to someone you're not familiar with?

“You stay in Ireland?” he asks.

“Yeah. You stay in Padianager?”

He chuckles, “Yes.”

“We both did our assignments.” Fuck me for saying that. I didn’t do any assignment about him, Enhle just happened to tell me a little bit about him.

“Are you comfortable with Nzuzo coming to Padianager to play with my brother?”

I still can’t believe he’s a brother to an 8 year old, his father did a number on him.

“I don’t know, I haven’t thought about it nor talked to him,” I say.

“Masintle thought maybe you’d want to come over first and meet her and Sphiwe

before allowing Nzuzo to come over,” he says.

“Masintle?” I ask.

“My stepmother.”

“Oh, maybe that would be better. Not that I don’t trust anyone, I just prefer to know who my son hangs around with.”

“She looked at it as a mother too. Is it okay if I fetch you later so that you can meet them and then tomorrow Nzuzo will come over?”

“Yeah, that’s okay.” I still need to report to my mother, she’s Nzuzo’s guardian, but I know she won’t have a problem with it. We are trying by all means to encourage him to make friends and be more social active.

I'm not sure about me being dropped off by a strange car, people talk around here. But I direct him to my gate, we didn't talk much, things are a bit awkward between us, you'd swear there's a big elephant we don't want to address whereas we don't even know each other that well.

“Can I have your number so that I can call when I'm coming?”

I'm out of my mind, I know none of these people. Imagine a mother who arranges for her son to go play at the house she doesn't even know. What if they're witches and they kill babies for their body parts?

“Are you not comfortable with that?” he asks.

I've been hesitant for a moment now. I take a deep breath and call out my number for him. I've already agreed, backing out now will make me look stupid. It could be that I watch too many Mzansi bioskops.

"You can come with a friend," he says.

I think he knows exactly what's going on in my mind right now.

I crack a shallow smile. "No, it's okay, I will come."

"What time should I pick you up?"

"In two hours," I say.

"Okay, see you then."

I open the door and climb out.

He comes out and helps me get my shopping bags at the back.

Such a gentleman!

I walk in to my aunt standing with her hands on the hips. Her face tells me I need to explain myself. Fuck, the kitchen window faces the gate, she saw the car.

“Hey aunty,” I say dropping the shopping bags on the table.

“Who was that?”

“A friend from work,” I say, hoping she’ll let it go.

But she doesn’t, she wants to know more.

“What kind of friend?” she asks.

“Male friend, we are not dating.” I hardly commit to relationships and at this point in my life I just want to take care of my mom

and Nzuzo, I don't have time to nurture men's lust and their big egos. The last relationship I had was with a guy I thought was monied, I wasn't looking for love.

"Nzuzo is 8 now, going to 9, you need to have fun before running out of time."

I can't believe she's actually giving me this advice, where's the blackness in her, she wants me to date.

"Have sex, it's part of growing up as a woman," she says.

I choke down a laugh. Isn't she the fine one to talk?

"You're also single and you are okay," I point out.

She chuckles, "You don't know what keeps me happy. Listen to me, I'm your aunt,

enjoy your youth years, you're not forced to commit to anything, just live a little SAFELY."

"Okay, but I haven't met any guy I'd want to have fun with." Or maybe I had a lot of fun in my teenagehood and it didn't end well.

My mother is in bed listening to Ukhozi FM, Nzu is playing on the floor. This woman is lazy, to think she used to call me the lazy one growing up.

"How was work?" she asks as I lower myself below her.

"It was okay. I'm actually here to talk to you about Nzuzo visiting my friend's little

brother at their house in Padianager tomorrow,” I say.

“That’s far, which friend is that?” This question!

“He’s a mutual friend, I know him through a co-worker. But I will go with Nzuzo to their house today and see if he’s comfortable with them then I will decide if he goes there tomorrow,” I say.

“I don’t have a problem, as long as you can confirm that my grandson will be safe there.”

Nzuzo is watching us, he’s stopped playing his car, I can’t tell whether he’s happy about this or not.

“Do you want to make a new friend? His name is Sphiwe.” I’m crossing my fingers

here because if he says no there wouldn't be anything I can do except canceling and disappointing Nkalipho and his stepmother.

“Yeah,” he nods.

I exhale in relief.

“Okay, come and choose what you're going to wear when his brother comes to pick us. Today we are just going to see your friend and come back, then tomorrow you'll go and spend time with him. Is that okay?”

He nods and abandons his car to follow me to his room to choose an outfit for the day.

I'm raising a little fashionista, there's nothing he loves doing more than choosing what to wear.

Him and I are getting ready in the bedroom, I don't know why I'm putting so much effort on my looks because this is about Nzuzo. Nkalipho will be here in 45 minutes, that's if he's the type that respects time.

Babo is in the kitchen with my mother and Aunt Teekay. I can hear his laugh from here, I think the last ceremony got us closer as a family. Even Mam' Busie has been coming to visit my mother frequently this week. I'm loving this, I don't even know they even hated each other in the first place. Babo is a cool uncle, he's always been good to me, the same way my father was good to Salo.

I go to the kitchen with Nzuzo, I want to feed him before we leave, I don't want his

stomach to rumble in front of rich people. He stands next to Babo's chair while I get his bowl. Then I hear him demanding his money from Babo.

Everyone is confused.

“Ngifuna ishumi lami!” he says.

As young as he is, he can be very aggressive when he's angry.

I stop what I'm doing to reprimand him, he shouldn't be raising his voice at an elder.

“Nzuzo stop that, Mkhulu paid back your R1, you put it inside your pencil case.”

He kicks his feet and starts screaming. I haven't had these tantrums in two years.

“I want my R1!” he keeps saying.

Babo pulls out his wallet with a calming smile and takes out R10 and gives him.

“No, I want my money, not this one,” he’s still screaming and messing his T-shirt with tears and saliva.

“Nzuzo, stop it!” I yell.

He doesn’t care, he’s pulling Babo’s clothes and demanding his money with tears flooding his face.

“Okay mzukulu, calm down,” Babo says and gives him R1.

He should be calming down because he wanted his R1, that was already paid back by the way, and now he’s getting another one that looks exactly like the one he gave.

He takes it and looks at it, then he throws it across the room and wails on top of his

voice. I don't do this but now I'm compelled to take off my sandal and remind him why mommy hates disrespectful children.

I pull him to the bedroom, my mother is yelling behind me, if I listen to her this child will cry until his chest dries up. I close the door and give him several spanks. Now he can cry for a valid reason. I sit on the bed and watch him rolling on the floor and wailing.

The door opens, his lifesaver is here to rescue him.

“Woza kuGogo khehla,” she picks him up and walks out with him.

I continue sitting on bed feeling devastated and hopeless. Motherhood is hard, sometimes it becomes too much that I feel like it would've been better if I wasn't born. I do everything right, but still nothing is enough. But I'm not going to cry...well, at least not too loud. I'm stopping tears before they drop to my cheeks and ruin my make-up, talk about classy crying.

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Nzuzo is still angry at me, I know, but he knows better than to give me another tantrum. We changed the T-shirt because he messed it, he's obedient and ready to go.

“Say goodbye to Gogo and Aunt Teekay,” I say.

He only waves his hand at them. Attitude!

I pick him up and go to the car parked outside waiting for us.

Nkalipho is a gentleman, he’s opening the door for me.

“Hello Nzuzo,” he says holding Nzuzo’s hand. There’s a genuine smile on his face.

There’s no response from Nzuzo.

Nkalipho puts him on the seat and fastens his belt.

I’m a bit concerned because he’s still quiet, mad-quiet.

“Is he okay?” Nkalipho asks, taking his seat.

I nod, “Yeah, he’s okay.”

“Maybe he will relax if I give him this.” It’s a tablet, he opens CandyCrush and passes it to Nzuzo at the back.

I’m holding my breath...

He takes it, I breathe out.

“We are going straight to the house?”

I frown, “Yes.”

Where else could we go?

“Okay,”

Awkwaaard!

I can’t believe I just had a whole 15 minutes drive with someone in silence. This is a quieter side, far from the noise and crowd. The concreted yard we are

driving through is big enough for three township houses. It's not a Top Billing type of property but it's still a house only a few can afford. Built modernly, connected to a double-door garage with a swimming pool at the back. It's spacious and glamorous, when you enter from at the front door you feel the warm touch of a woman.

Nzuzo has forgiven me, I guess. He's holding onto my dress tightly, he can see we are in a different area with different people and I'm the only person he can trust.

"This way," Nkalipho says, leading us towards the sitting room.

There's a glamorous woman sitting on her phone with a glass of red wine in front of

her. I'm not sure if she's coming from a photoshoot or this is how women dress while sitting at home this side.

"We are here," Nkalipho announces.

She lifts her head, looks at me and at Nzuzo, then she smiles.

"Finally! Is this the little Nzuzo?" She throws the phone on the coffee-table and takes a sip of her wine before standing up and coming to Nzuzo.

"Look at you sweet-pie! Oh my goodness, he allows you to cut his hair?" She looks at me.

I'm still caught by her glam.

"Yeah," this is a very typical women first encounter, we are already discussing motherhood.

“What is your trick?”

“I don’t have one, he usually asks for the haircut himself.”

“Wow, can we swap?”

I laugh, what else can I do?

“Let’s go and call Sphiwe, alright Nzuzo?”

She’s pulling him and walking away with him.

Then she looks back and exhales with an eye roll.

“Pardon me, Sphiwe has been so excited about this. I’m Masentle, their mom.”

Their mom, yet Nkalipho almost looks her age.

“Nondumezulu,” I say.

“Let me fetch Sphiwe then we’ll talk.”

I'm still on my feet, so is Nkalipho. When they disappear he asks me to take a seat.

He remains standing, not looking at my direction.

It's awkward, I reach for my phone in the purse and focus on it.

He walks away and disappears in the passage we came through. I release a breath I wasn't even holding and put my phone away.

Masentle comes back with the boys.

Sphiwe is almost Nzuzo's age, he's a very light-skinned boy with a lot of hair but you can still see his father in him. Nzuzo still

looks uncomfortable but Masentle is holding his hand.

She instructs Sphiwe to greet and introduce himself. English, okay.

I'm tempted to ask if he speaks any Zulu because there will be a language barrier if that's not the case. But his mother asks him about the balls and he replies in Zulu like he was reading my mind.

“Is there anything Nzuzo doesn't eat?”-
Masentle.

“Cheese,” I say.

“Okay, noted. Does he have any phobias?”

“None as far as I know, but he can talk, he'll tell you if there's something he's scared of,” I say.

“Let me give them ice-cream and leave them to bond. What do you drink? Wine, water, soda?”

“Water, please.”

They’re off to the kitchen, I’m alone again.

I hear loud footsteps coming in and lift my head. My heart almost leaps out of my throat. Did I come to his house and expect not to see him? He looks different in casual clothes. In fact he looks less old than he was in the car.

“Oh, okay,” he says walking slower with his stare fixed on me.

I’m not sure where to look or what to say to him.

“It’s nice seeing you again ndodakazi. I thought you said you and my son were not friends.” There’s a mocking tone lying underneath.

“Yeah, we are not friends,” I say.

He chortles, “That’s the spirit!”

I’m not sure what that means.

“Did he leave you alone here? Go to the kitchen and grab yourself a drink, I’m sure he’s still strategizing,” he says and walks away chuckling softly.

Nkalipho appears just as his father disappears to where his wife is.

“Hey, can I get you something to drink?”

“Your mother is getting it,” I say.

He stands, now it looks like he doesn't know what to do with himself.

I break the awkwardness and ask, "Did you tell your father that we are friends?"

"No, what did he say?"

"Nothing, he keeps asking if we are friends."

"Oh, okay."

These are their two signature words, oh okay.

Masentle is back with my water. Nzuzo and Sphiwe are behind her with bowls of ice-cream, they're chatting like old friends now.

"So he talks?" Masentle.

“Yeah, he’s bubbly at times.”

“They’re going to be best friends. One black friend for a change.”

I’m not sure how I feel about that statement but I smile and sip my water.

“Your skin looks good. So does your body, it doesn’t show that you have a child. How long is your hair?”

Wow, overwhelming.

“It reaches below my neck, I’ve grown it for two years,” I say.

“Wow, so you don’t need a weave like us. Minus one expense!” she laughs.

I laugh too.

“You work at Shoprite?”

**“And job-hunting,” I say, almost
defensively.**

“Oh okay, what are you looking for?”

**“Any good-paying job, I have bills to pay.
But I’m looking mostly in laboratories, I did
Biochemistry and Biology,” I say.**

**“Wow! And you’re working at the mall
counting people’s change?”**

**“It’s life, but I’m sure something will
eventually come,” I say.**

**She looks at Nkalipho, there’s a silent
argument held by their stares.**

**“You have friends in different industries,
right?”**

**He clears his throat, “Yeah, I’ll see what I
can do.”**

Am I getting connections? This could change my whole life.

Masentle looks back at me, she's unbelievably gorgeous, she looks nothing over 35. I'm wondering how old she was when they started dating, she must've been in her twenties and Nkalipho's father in his 40s.

"Let me get you a snack," she says and leaves.

I'm left alone with Nkalipho again.

Well, he stands up too.

"I'm going to check on the boys."

I let out a short chuckle.

"You don't like me, do you?"

He's taken back by that question.

"Or you don't like talking to strangers that much?" I say trying to control my first question, I didn't mean it as in him liking me as a woman.

"You're not a stranger to me," he says.

Impressive!

"Do you want me to sit?"

"No," I say with an awkward chuckle.

"Let's both go and check on them." He pulls out his hand to help me off my seat.

I appreciate the gesture, but holding his hand?

"I'm fine, thanks." I stand and follow him to the room where the boys are.

They're busy with drawing books, I guess Sphiwe is introverted, he's not much of an outdoor child. Nzuzo only looks at me once and continues with what he's doing.

Nkalipho chuckles next to me.

"They got along quicker than you and me."

"We are not getting along?" This is news to me, I thought we were besties.

He doesn't answer, I turn my head and look at him.

Our eyes lock for a minute, then he does what he always do; looks away.

He clears his throat, "Is his father around?"

"No, he's not," I say.

"Is he late?" What a funny question.

"No, he's alive and well."

He nods, no further questions.

Masentle calls my name, she's one bubbly person, I'm still reserved around her and she's acting like she's known me for years.

"You can go, I'll watch them," Nkalipho says.

It turns out snacks is the whole pantry and all sort of sliced fruits laid on the table with her bottle of red wine and a box of fruit juice for me. I'm trying not to eat like I'm a starved hunter. She's doing most of the talking, telling me about the house, how they moved from the other side of the road to build a bigger house here. It's a lot of stories, apparently the old house belongs to Nkalipho now. I don't want to change the

mood with my sad stores, so I just listen to her. Time flies, before I know it's almost 7pm. Nzuzo needs to be in bed, I hope he will sleep after all the sugar he's been eating since we got here.

I also need some rest, tomorrow I'm working.

Nkalipho's father comes out to say goodbye. I think this highlights my evening, he's such a warm man. I can say they're all kind, Nzuzo clicked with all of them. He's on Nkalipho's tail as we approach the door.

"We hope to see you soon," Masentle says.

"Hopefully," I say.

Nzuzo says his goodbye to his friend before Nkalipho lifts him up at the door. Boys bonded, all three of them. Nzuzo is now

chatting his heart away and calling Nkalipho 'Lume', which is Malume. I have no doubt that tomorrow will be good. He's telling me about 'Piwe' all the way home.

Ma hasn't locked the gate yet, even though 7pm has clocked. Nzuzo runs in without even saying proper goodbye to Nkalipho, now all he cares about is telling his grandmother about Piwe.

"Thank you, he had a good time, I'm sure tomorrow will be good," I say turning to look at Nkalipho who's leaning by the car, staring at our gate.

He takes a few steps towards me and stops just a foot away.

“Take Masentle’s number, just in case you want to talk to her tomorrow when Nzuzo is with her and Sphiwe,” he says.

I didn’t even think of that. I take the number from his phone and save it.

“It’s late, I have to go inside, thanks for today,” I say.

“Nondumezulu,” he calls my full name.

I panic everytime someone does this.

Nondumezulu- it sounds like I’m in trouble, because why else would someone waste their breath calling such a long name.

I’m looking at him, this time he locks eyes with me without a flinch.

“Why are you hitting him?” he asks.

I did not expect this. I feel interrogated, by the wrong person for that matter. We haven't known each other for a week and he's here questioning me like a policeman.

“He showed me the bruises, why would you do something like that?” he says.

I allow myself to breathe before I respond.

“He was throwing a R1 tantrum, it's a very long story that I'm not interested in telling, I was reprimanding him, unfortunately he has a sensitive skin.” I'm explaining myself to this man who knows nothing about me, must be nice!

“Is that how you are? You hit people if you're not happy with their actions or it's just him because he can't hit you back?”

Okay, he needs to stop.

“You don’t know me Nkalipho, so don’t stand here and judge me. It’s my child, my responsibility!” Now I’m angry.

“So that makes you right?”

We Jesu!

“Boy, bye!”

“Nondumezulu,”

“Nkalipho, no! You’re not going to judge me, I do this alone, without any help. I discipline my child, I don’t abuse him.”

“Okay, I’m sorry to think you could’ve handled it better. Children get frustrated when they’re misunderstood, his case is even more complicated because he may want to express himself and not know how to.”

Now he's a child expert?

“The problem is you think about things that don't concern you.”

“Okay, have a goodnight.”

Can't say the same about him, I walk away.

There's a sting of pain and regret tugging at my heart. I get inside the house, Nzuzo is on my mother's lap telling her about his new friend. I pull him and go to the kitchen with him. I do what I should've done earlier.

“Baby, why did you refuse the money Mkhulu gave you? It was R10, that's ten times what you borrowed him,” I ask holding both his hands.

“Mkhulu doesn’t want to give me my R1, he gave it to the goat.”

I’m confused. It’s been a week since the ceremony was held, he didn’t have a problem all along, now all of a sudden he wants his R1, not just any the exact one he gave them.

“Do you want mommy to give you another R1?”

He shakes his head, no.

“So you’re going to throw another tantrum when you see Mkhulu?”

He folds his arms with his lips pursed. Yes, he’s going to throw R1 tantrums everytime he sees Babo.

I’m defeated.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 6

I don't know how many times I've stopped myself from calling either Nkalipho or Masentle to ask to talk to my son. When I came back from work he was already picked up and gone. Ma is calm, she tells me Nzuzo was very happy to go I shouldn't worry. I just can't help it, especially after yesterday's tantrums.

It's still early, 3:33pm, Nzuzo is coming back after 5. I join my mother on the couch and watch Dumisa with her. It doesn't move me now, I think my God-child spirit died a long time ago. I haven't been inside the church door in two years. My mom used to go every Sunday but she hasn't been that active lately.

“So Ma, I talked to Salo about going to see a sangoma,” I say.

Picking the remote and lowering the volume? I don't see it ending well.

“A what?” she asks.

“A sangoma, maybe I have bad lucks or dark spirits, that's why nothing is moving forward,” I say.

“God is going to answer your prayers.”

“When Ma? When?” I’m tired.

“He does things on his own time, and believe me, his time is always right.” I’ve heard this for the past three years.

“Unfortunately I’m done waiting for him,” I say.

She exhales heavily, “You know those people can turn you against innocent people. They always see things, with them it’s never nothing.”

“It’s worth a try, I can’t be sitting here and waiting for a breakthrough I’m not even sure is on the way,” I say.

“I cannot stop you, you’re an adult, just don’t bring me unverified things that’s going to make me hate people.” With that

said she picks the remote and increases the volume.

I was hoping for words of encouragement but clearly I talked to the wrong one. They say you have to put faith in everything that you do for it to work. I don't want to go to a sangoma tomorrow with negative thoughts.

I take my hat, I'm going to see Babo. He's used the zangomas before, if there's one person who can give me encouragement it's him. I believe it was because of his faith in them that Salo found a good job after struggling almost all her life.

I find Mam' Busie alone in the house. It's not tense as it used to be, she invites me to the lounge and gets me a glass of juice.

“What did we do to deserve this visit?”

“Come on Ma, I'm not a stranger here. But I'm actually here to see Babo, is he around?”

“No baby, he went to town,” she glances at her silver wrist-watch. “It's been two hours, I'm sure he linked up with some old friends, amadoda anjalo phela.”

“It was busy in town, even my aunt is still caught up there, Ma says she left in the morning to pay for the funeral insurance,” I say.

“That could be the case. What did you want from him? Maybe I can help.”

“I’m not sure you can, it’s about zangomas,” I say with a chuckle.

She sits up straight and looks at me.

“What about them?”

“I want to go and see one tomorrow. I think there’s something wrong with my life nothing is working out.”

She nods sympathetically.

“I get where you’re coming from. You can never know who’s blocking your blessings, I mean, you were promising as a child. So tell me, which sangoma were you thinking of?”

“That’s where Babo comes in, I don’t know,” I say.

We both laugh. I’m so clueless.

“Okay, I will talk to him, I’m sure he can refer you to one.”

“Thanks, I will come back later.”

She stops me as I attempt to get off the couch.

“Yesterday he told me that Nzuzo had an episode.”

I need to sit and take a deep breath for this.

“He was crying for the R1 that Babo borrowed. It was chaotic, I haven’t seen him act like that in two years,” I say.

She clears her throat, “This thing bothers me. Didn’t the doctors say it will get better with age?”

“No, he can lose the core symptoms and manage to live with it,” I say.

She sighs with despair. “I actually suggested to your father that he takes action about this. He has this condition, yes, but I think there’s also an anger from the ancestors.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s leeching on his condition and using him to express something to his grandfather. He needs to perform a ceremony and acknowledge this.”

Okay, she needs to slow down, she’s blowing it out of proportion.

“You’re exaggerating Ma,” I say with the utmost respect.

“You’re a child, you don’t know these things. It wasn’t a coincidence that when his tantrums came back after years he

exploded to his grandfather. Whatever it is that your father did wrong, he needs to acknowledge it fast.”

“That’s how Nzuzo acts. He almost got me in trouble the other day in town, we bumped into his father at KFC, even though he didn’t know that was his father I think he felt his energy, blood connects. When we left he was angry and he took his frustrations out on someone’s car, before I knew it I had an angry man charging towards me. He doesn’t know what it is, he cannot express it verbally, but he snaps easily ever since that day.” I haven’t told my mother about this, I know she will stress about it and I don’t want to put her through that again.

“Njomane is weak, he should’ve dealt with that foolish boy and demanded for the damages to be paid. That’s what I hate about him, if it was your father I’m sure that Solwazi boy wouldn’t have dreamed of abandoning you with a child.”

This is the first time I’m hearing her say a positive thing about my father. She looks angry.

“It is what it is Ma,” I say.

She exhales heavily.

“You know what, Njomane will perform a ceremony for Nzuzo and asks for the ancestors to bring him light and help him manage this condition,” she says.

“I don’t think it will be effective.” I’m not being ungrateful but I know the poor goat

or chicken will die for nothing, Nzuzo was born this way.

“His job, as your father’s brother, is to try absolutely everything to help you and Nzuzo. In fact he’s going to give you money for the sangoma consultation,” she says reaching for her phone and dialing.

I’m laughing. So much drama! Babo has his hands full here.

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It’s almost 5:30 and Nzuzo hasn’t been brought home. I didn’t want to be an annoying mom, Masentle sent me pictures of them playing and they looked happy, but time should be respected. I call Nkalipho

standing by the kitchen window staring at the gate.

His phone rings a couple of times before he picks up.

“I’m almost at your gate,” he says.

“Okay,” I drop the call and breathe out in relief.

I grab my jacket, it’s a bit cold now, and I go wait at the gate.

He’s driving the white Hyundai Creta again.

The window rolls down,

“Come,” he says.

I’m confused, he should be dropping

Nzuzo, not calling me to the car.

But I walk to the door and open and get in.

Nzuzo is not here...okay.

“He wanted you to come and get him.”

That’s crap!

“Why?” I ask.

“Let’s just go, it’s just 15 minutes away, we will be back with him.”

“This is not what we agreed on Nkalipho. You said you’ll bring my child at 5pm. Your mother Whatsapp’d me two hours ago, she didn’t mention any of this.”

He chooses silence, which just infuriates me further.

I have to call my mother and tell her. You know what, he was right about him and I not getting along. I don’t think we will, he’s too much.

The pulls up at his home, he steals a glance at me before opening his door and climbing out. He's coming to my door to open for me, I open it myself and get out.

He stands and exhales audibly.

“You're angry?”

“No, I'm not.”

His fingers touch my hand, something inside me jumps but I don't show it because I just said I'm not angry.

“Let's go inside,” he says, fully holding my hand.

Okay.

We walk in, I hear the noise from the door, these boys are still playing.

Masentle is watching TV, I immediately pull my hand from his when we walk into her.

She turns her head, her lips stretch into a smile.

“Here comes the party-popper!” she says.

“I hear the noise,” I say.

“It’s been a mad-house since he came. Let me get his bag, the nanny already helped him take a bath,” she says.

That’s a relief, at least they thought about that.

She goes to the noisy room, I’m here with this man.

“When are you going to visit?” He sounds relaxed than I expected, he’s been awkward everytime we were alone.

“Visit who? You have a sister?”

He chuckles, “Visit me.”

“Do we have anything in common?”

“We can find out,” he says.

Masentle comes back with the boys before we can finalize it. I don’t know why I’m smitten by this, I’m not ready for any fling or relationship. Maybe I haven’t had a man asking me for a visit in a long time, that’s the reason.

“Look at my car!” Nzuzo brags showing me a toy tractor.

“I also have mine,” – Sphiwe.

I have to compliment and thank Masemtle, the dealership woman.

“Did he give you any headache?” I ask.

She laughs, “Headache? Are you talking about my sweet Nzuzo?”

“Sweet? I need your tricks, because wow.”

We chat a bit more, Nkalipho’s father is not around today. Sphiwe wants to come with Nkalipho but his mother says no.

Nzuzo is singing numbers in the car. I’m not sure if they were part of his game with Sphiwe.

“Zero...seven hundred and thirty one...forty and and...”

“And six,” – Nkalipho.

Nzuzo always chooses the hardest way of remembering numbers, I have tried teaching him easy ways but they just confuse him.

“What numbers are those?” I ask.

“Lume’s number,” he says.

Impressive, but why is he teaching my son his number?

“He’s clever,” Nkalipho says.

I have a lot of questions but for now I’ll let the sleeping dogs lie.

I’m excluded from most of their conversation because I wasn’t with them today. I’m seeing a side of Nzuzo I’ve never seen before, which leaves me wondering how he would’ve turned out if he had a father in his life.

“Lume are you going to teach me how to ride a bike?”

There’s a twinge of pain in my heart.

“If mommy allows me to buy you a bicycle,” he says.

“Don’t worry, I will buy it,” I say.

I feel overwhelmed. This has been me for the last two years, sometimes I just feel like crying out of nowhere. Why does he want to buy my son a bike? I’m not a failure.

“Okay, mommy is going to buy it and then I’m going to teach you how to ride,” he tells Nzuzo.

“I want a big one,” Nzuzo says.

“Okay boy, you’ll get a big one. Is your tractor still okay?”

I look at the street lights outside the window. I don't know why I'm promising him a bike because looking at my budget for the next three months I know I cannot afford it.

The car stops outside my gate, I open my door as he opens his.

He gets Nzuzo out and helps him with his backpack. He runs towards the gate leaving me behind as usual.

"Thanks," I say to Nkalipho.

"Can we talk for a minute?"

Deep breath...

I stop and listen.

"I like Nzuzo," he says.

“Okay, thank you.”

“Obviously I don’t have a child, I don’t know when it is too much for a parent, so I’d really appreciate if you call me out calmly when I cross boundaries,” he says.

“I don’t have a problem with you doing anything Nkalipho. I appreciate you for linking him with your brother, he’s happy. But my problem is you’re still just a man I met in town, tomorrow you can decide to block my number and cut him out of your life. Nzuzo is a difficult child, I’m sorry to say this. I have come too far with him, just him and I. I don’t want him to get used to an uncle who buys him bikes and all, I will not be able to fill that gap when you decide to cut him off.”

“You think I do everytime someone’s child throws a can on my car?”

“I don’t know who you are Nkalipho,” I say, frustrated.

“Then get to know me.” He steps closer and holds my hand.

It feels strange- in a good way.

“I don’t just like your son, you too.”

I take a deep breath and lift my eyes to meet his gaze.

“Can we talk over the phone? My aunt is probably watching.”

“Okay,” he closes the space between us and wraps his arms around me. He smells good, his hug is warm, I’m leaning on too hard.

He brushes my arms and sighs softly.

“Have a goodnight.”

“You too.”

We part ways.

My brain is in awe, what did my body just do?

I have to snap out of those funny feelings before I walk through the door. Nobody is in the kitchen, that’s a relief because nobody saw me hugging a man outside the gate. There’s a deep voice, Babo is here.

“I’m waiting for you,” he says.

I’m still thinking what if he walked out on me hugging Nkalipho outside the gate.

“I’m sorry I took long,” I say lowering myself on the couch.

“It’s okay, my child. I have talked to your mother about performing a ceremony for Nzuzo, just to ask our ancestors to look over him and bring light to his life”

Mam’ Busie was serious about this.

“Okay, when?” I still don’t think it’s necessary but one thing I’m not going to do is deprive my son a chance to have a brighter life than mine. Maybe if I had ceremonies done for me when I was a child my life would’ve turned out differently.

“Tomorrow is okay, it’s not a big ceremony, only a chicken will be slaughtered, then I will light candles for him and speak to my forefathers,” he says.

“Okay Babo, thank you. Can it be done later because in the morning I have to go somewhere, I think Mam’ Busie briefed you about it. Tomorrow is the only day I’m off work,” I say.

“Yes, she told me, I will refer you to the one I trust.”

I nod gratefully.

It has to work, this is my last attempt.

I have hope though, for both Nzuzo and I.

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Listen, this thing is scary than I thought.

Walking through a fence with animal skulls, apprentices walking up and down with

their faces painted, and then I have to enter this small hut with a door shorter than Nzuzo.

I leave my shoes outside and enter with my 2L of water and candle.

The aunt, I don't know if I'm allowed to say that or they're all referred to as gogos, has her eyes firmly shut.

Do I greet?

“Hello,”

She shakes her head and groans like a bull.

Get a grip Nondu!

Her eyes opens, she doesn't look scary as I thought.

“Who are you?” she asks.

Is she not supposed to know?

“Nondumezulu Mhlongo,” I say.

She shakes her head.

My heart skips a beat. Am I not a Mhlongo?

“What happened to you?” she asks.

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m here.”

Head shake again. Okay, this is just a habit.

“Where’s your father?”

“He’s late,” I say.

“I’m asking you where is his spirit?”

“Home,” I say.

“Light your candle and put your water

here.” She points in front of her. I do as

instructed, but I have to strike the match

five times before my candle burns, she’s

watching me and shaking her head. This is

not a good sign.

“I don’t see your father. I cannot feel him anywhere near you. In face I don’t see anyone with you, you are alone. Why would they abandon you?” She burns impepho and asks me to kneel with her. She calls them out, my ancestors, she asks where they are, why I’m here alone. She calls for hers to be present as well.

She blows inside a small skin bag and then throws its content on the floor.

I don’t know if it’s dead animal bones or jaws, whatever it is scatters on the floor and grabs her attention.

“Who took your father’s spirit?”

Deep breath...

“I don’t know,” I say.

“There’s a woman, she’s the last person who entered the ancestral hut after the ceremony that was performed, she’s very close to you, makhosi!”

“Makhosi!” I nod. If I remember correctly Aunt Teekay swept the hut a day after the ceremony, my mom hardly goes in there.

“This is the person who knows where your father is.”

Whaaaat???

“Excuse me?” My ears may have heard that incorrectly.

“A woman related to you and your mother, the last person to enter the house where your alter is, knows where your father is.

Your father’s spirit was taken away, he’s no longer an active ancestor to his family,

others were taken a long time ago. Ihlahla likayihlo lishintshiwe, you need to bring him back home,” she says.

I cannot feel my heart beating, but I’m still breathing. I’m alive, even though I strongly wish I wasn’t.

“Is that why nothing is working out for me?”

“Nothing is working out because this woman is jealous of you and doesn’t want to see your mother happy. She says your mother thinks she’s better than everyone.”

My hands sweat and tremble. My head just went back to that kitchen conversation where Mam’ Busie warned me about close relatives after Aunt Teekay called my mother lazy.

“Everything you had was taken away from you; a picture of your graduation is somewhere pinned with nails and tied with strong muthi. She doesn’t want to see you make it. I see a sibling rivalry as well.”

Tears break and flood my face.

My mom has never had any rivalry with my aunt. She’s not going to believe anything I say even though it makes sense. She didn’t want me to come here.

Why would Aunt Teekay do this to me?

My mother got married and had a child.

Maybe she wanted that for herself too, which is understandable. But my mother has never acted better than her, why the fuck would she hate her own sister like that?

**How am I going to look at her knowing
what she's done?**

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 7

I'm at the gate struggling to breathe. I don't know how I'm going to look at this woman in the eyes, how am I going to sit in the same room with her and not fear for my life? What did I ever do to her? I've been nothing but a good niece.

I finally collect a huge breath, calm myself down and walk in. They haven't started with the ceremony preparations yet, I actually don't want Aunt Teekay to touch anything. If it was up to me she'd be out of the gate and never set her foot here again, but I know it will take time for my mother to wrap her head around this, if she even gives me a chance to tell her what the sangoma said.

As if the devil is testing me, the first person I see when I walk in is Aunt Teekay. I avoid locking eyes with her, I don't want her to know that I know and I don't trust myself not to just break down and cry. I need to deal with this the best calm way I can.

“You’re back. How did it go?” Wow, she’s now fishing for information, trying to figure out what her next move is going to be.

“It went well,” I say, walking past her.

“Oh, did they give you any medicine?”

I stop and look at her, before I know it my emotions have gotten the better of me.

“How is that any of your business? What are you going to do with that information?”

There’s a slight frown on her face; she’s acting confused.

“Okay sorry, go and sit, I know you’re hungry, I will bring you some food.”

Give me food? How can someone be so fake.

“I will make myself food when I want it.” I walk away and go to my mother’s room, she’s with Nzuzo. I throw my bag on her bed and stand next to the window, taking a few breaths to calm down.

“Who did they say is bewitching you?” I can tell from the way she’s asking that whatever answer I give she won’t take it seriously.

“They didn’t say any names. But I need you to be careful of your sister, don’t let my son be alone around her when I’m not here. When is she leaving anyway?”

She tells Nzuzo to leave the room for a minute and then stands up across me with a big scowl. “Didn’t I tell you that those people are going to bring nothing but

division to this family? What did Thembelihle do to you?"

"Didn't she clean the alter the other day?" I ask.

"She did, you know she hates dirty places," she says.

"Okay fine, let's go there now." I don't wait for her to get defensive I walk out and turn to give her a demanding look. She follows me, we exit through the back door.

I haven't been in here since the ceremony, we walk in and my eyes quickly go to the alter. I lift my eyes up to the roof where the leaf was pinned among others and I notice that it has been replaced with a new one.

My father died almost 9 years ago, his leaf

was dry and worn-out, there's no way it would look like this. I look at my mom, she's noticing it too.

“The sangoma said it was taken by the last woman who entered here after the ceremony,” I tell her.

“But..it can't...it can't be your aunt,” she's struggling to accept the truth. I don't blame her, that's her only sister. “Where would she take it? For what?”

“To make sure nothing goes right for us, she's taken all our luck.”

“Yet she's struggling more than us,” she says.

She's not lying with that, we are better than Aunt Teekay, just not financially. She's struggling in many areas of her life but still,

that doesn't dismiss what the sangoma saw.

"I'm not comfortable around her," I say.

"How do I tell her to leave Nondu? What if all this is wrong?"

"What if she sabotages my son's ceremony? I don't know Ma. You're an elder here, protect me and Nzuzo, don't just sit and fold your arms." I walk out and leave her there, my son is in the house with that woman alone.

I almost faint when I walk into Nzuzo eating with her in the kitchen. But I quickly calm myself down, I don't want her to know that I know and take an even witchier decision.

“Nzuzo you don’t want us to go and buy fries?” I ask.

“No,” he shakes his head.

Once he shakes his head know that there’s no convincing him otherwise.

“Sausage and igwinya?” I ask.

She lifts her eyes to me, “Hhayi bo Nondu, he’s eating a healthy meal and you want to go and make him fat?”

“Kids are allowed to be fat,” I say and go to the fridge to get my icy water. My attitude is definitely getting out of control, I’m failing to pretend as if everything is okay.

“You need to go and ask that sangoma for your manners, clearly you left them there,” she says.

I don't answer. Nzuzo starts cracking up, laughing. He's under her spell.

“Laugh, my boy. Such a grown woman acting like a 5 year old who lost her sweet, imihlola!” She won't keep quiet, this is how she is, annoying.

“Aunty, I don't want to have a goat,” – Nzuzo.

I turn my head quickly and look at him.

“What goat?” Aunt Tekaay asks.

“Mkhulu's goat, I don't want it.”

“He's not slaughtering a goat, but a chicken,” Aunt Teekay says, thinking he'd be less freaked out and impressed. Killing a chicken is better than a goat, right?

“No, I don't want it,” – Nzuzo.

Okay, there's something going on here.

He's about to pull another "R1" stunt.

"You don't want a ceremony?" I ask him.

He mustn't test me. He's never had anyone caring about his connection to the ancestors, his father will never slaughter a frog for him and he's here saying this.

"Ya, angfuni," he says, arrogantly.

"It's not up to you Nzuzo, stop being a brat.

You should be happy that Mkhulu wants

you to prosper and be okay. It's not

something he's compelled to do, it's coming out of the goodness of his heart," I tell him.

He pushes his plate off the table, the food

spills all over the floor. Aunt Teekay looks

shocked, I'm not, this is how he's been

lately. But this time I don't take off my sandal, I tell him firmly what's going on.

“You're going to lose this attitude before Babo gets here and when the ceremony begins you're going to participate and not become a brat. Is that clear?”

He looks at Aunt Teekay, she decides to insert herself.

“Don't be so hard on him, he's just a child,” she says.

“Please stay out of it.” Did she put him up to this?

I wouldn't be surprised, I'm sure she doesn't want the best for him.

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Babo has arrived with Mam' Busie who came with her house's kitchen set and sent Nzuzo to fetch her Indian spices when she realized we don't have much to cook our stew with. I'm sure my father is looking down on his brother and proud of how supportive he's been to us. Things weren't always like this, we have made quite a progress.

By the way Aunt Teekay is here, helping Mam' Busie cook. My mother hasn't gotten rid of her, she didn't even try, I don't know how she plans to deal with her. I'm keeping my eyes open and watching her every move.

“Why don’t you go and get ready because there’s only one salad left to make, I can manage,” Mam’ Busie says to her.

“Are you sure?” She wants to be always hands-on and ruin things.

“Yeah, don’t worry,” – Mam’ Busie.

She dries her hands and leaves the kitchen. I cannot help the disgusted look on my face as I watch her walk away.

My attention is grabbed back to the room by Mam’ Busie’s voice.

“What’s on your mind? You’ve been quiet and looking at your aunt like you’re planning her murder,” she says.

“Nothing Ma, I’m just thinking about the ceremony.”

She lowers her eyes, expressing her little belief in what I'm saying.

“Are you sure this has nothing to do with your visit to a sangoma?”

Yeah, she got me.

“It is Ma, I heard a lot of things and my mother is not taking any action,” I say.

“Maybe try to talk to your aunt, she's the only person who can get through your mother.”

“I wish I could, but as you said Ma, trust no one,” I say.

“Mmm, I hope whatever it is you get brave enough to take action and not wait on your mother. You know how slow she can be, this is your life,” she says.

Why didn't I talk to her in the first place?
She's always sound-minded.

"What do you think I should do?" I ask.

"Protect yourself from those who hurt you,
blood or no blood," she says.

I nod, that's exactly what I'm going to do, I
will protect my family against Aunt Teekay.

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My mom walks yells for me to come to the
lounge. I wrap a towel over my chest and
go there. Everything is done, we are just
waiting for Babo to do the ancestor things
and then we will eat.

"I'm looking for my phone," mom says.

“I have my own phone, why are you asking me about it?” What makes her think I’d use her Alcatel, she always accuses me of using her airtime whenever I touch it.

“This is strange, I left my phone here. Where’s Nzuzo?”

“In his room,” I say.

“Check if he didn’t take it.”

Sigh! She’s really stopping everything for an Alcatel.

I go to Nzuzo’s room, I’m annoyed, I want this ceremony to be done and over with.

Luckily her phone is right on the bed as I walk in. I take it back to the owner.

“Nzuzo thinks we are sharing this phone,” she’s laughing as she puts it in her boobs.

They do share the phone, she allowed him access to it.

“Tell him to come out, I need to go with him to the alter,” Babo says.

Then it comes back to me, Nzuzo was not in his room.

I quickly return to his room, hoping he was hiding somewhere or playing behind the bed.

But he’s not in his room and the last time I saw him he was here.

I won’t panic, I will check every room and outside. He wouldn’t leave the yard without telling anyone and knowing exactly what today is about.

I check everywhere, even outside the gate, he’s nowhere to be seen.

Now I'm panicking, I go back inside the house and ask if anyone saw him.

"Was he not in his room playing?" Aunt Teekay asks.

"He was, I don't know where he went," I say, sweating down a storm.

Everyone gets up, we start searching and asking if the neighbours have seen him.

Twenty minutes pass, I'm all over the township searching and asking people if they didn't see Nzu. Nobody has seen him.

Babo asks everyone to calm down and wait. He still thinks Nzuzo is somewhere playing and he will come back. We cannot get the police to help us yet, they will tell

us to wait. This is my only child, I'm losing my mind.

"I told you to be easy on him," Aunt Teekay says.

That's a very weird thing to say. We are all looking at her, everything the sangoma told me comes back rushing to my head.

"Is there anything you know that I don't?" I ask.

"What do you mean? Nzuzo told you that he doesn't want any ceremony and you started threatening him and shouting," she says.

Mam' Busie looks at me, and then back at her.

"She did right, children only listen when one raises her voice. Why does it sound like

it's you MaNkosi who didn't want this ceremony to happen?"

"And why would I have anything against the ceremony Busisekile?" Aunt Teekay asks.

"I don't know, you look happy that Nzuzo has disappeared. Maybe it didn't sit well with you that his grandfather is helping him get closer to his ancestors," Mam' Busie says.

Babo clears his throat, "None of this is necessary. Going back and forth won't bring my grandson back home in time for the ceremony."

"But why is Thembelihle so relaxed about this whole thing?" Finally, my mother has something to say.

Babo looks at her, “We all react differently, and it helps that there’s one relaxed person among us.”

Mam’ Busie frowns, “Excuse me?”

Babo quickly shifts his eyes away from Aunt Teekay.

“I’m just saying, Nzuzo will come back,” he says.

I must say it’s quite surprising that he’d take Aunt Teekay’s side on this. But I understand, he doesn’t know her true colors yet.

Mom stands and wraps a scarf around her neck. Just like me, she’s restless and thinking of the worst that could happen as we sit here.

“MaKhumalo let’s go and look for him again,” she says.

Aunt Teekay stands with them. They both look at her.

“No, you stay here,” mom says.

She’s finally seeing her sister for who she is. She leaves with Mam’ Busie, honestly they’re the only ones I trust right now.

My phone rings, I step out of the lounge leaving Aunt Teekay and Babo alone. It’s Nkalipho calling for the sixth time now. I have no time for his love advances at the moment, I answer very snappily.

“What do you want?”

“Ummm, are you okay?”

“No, I’m not,” I say.

“I’ve been trying to call you, you are not answering your phone. Nzuzo is with me, what happened?”

I stop and take a huge breath. I’m relieved he’s safe but mad at the same time, because what the hell.

“How did you get my son?” I ask.

“He called me with another number and said I should pick him up from Gcaleka. I had to drive from Sithebe while he sat there alone. I offered to take him home and he started crying, what happened?”

I’m going to hurt this child! What kind of a stunt is this? I also blame him, he wanted this to happen that’s why he kept teaching Nzuzo his cellphone number.

“Bring him home, we have been all over the township looking for him.”

“He doesn’t want to come home, he’s scared.”

“That’s my son Nkalipho, bring him home.”

“So he ran away from home? Did you beat him again?”

Oh shwele! I’m trying to be calm here.

“Where are you?” I ask.

“I’m in my house,” he says.

“I’m coming to fetch my son.”

I cannot believe this. Nkalipho has been here for a minute and he’s already teaching my son that he can run away from home.

I put my jacket on and walk to the lounge to ask Babo to call Mam' Busie and tell her to come back with mom. When I walk in they're having an awkwardly low conversation, I didn't know they were this close to each other.

“I just got a call from a friend who picked Nzuzo up from Gcaleka.”

“Thank God, I was worried,” Babo says.

Aunt Teekay just looks at me, showing no emotion. She's probably disappointed that he's found and alive. I'm going to hire a taxi to take me there fast, hopefully I won't be charged over R100.

“We will continue with the ceremony when I come back,” I tell Babo.

“Don’t worry ndodakazi, we still have time,” he says.

There’s a side-look that Aunt Teekay is giving him, like she’s planning his murder or something. I need to warn him, he needs to be careful of this woman.

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I got a free taxi, the driver didn’t hesitate to take me here. Within 20 minutes I’m in Padianager parked below the road of his father’s house. I know his is across the road, it’s as fancy but smaller. I pay the taxi driver and make my way towards the house. I’m ready to fight, he had no right to bring my son here without letting me know.

I should've known he was up to something when he taught Nzuzo his cellphone number. If he thinks these little stunts will help him get me laid, then he's got another thing coming.

The gate is not locked, I open it and walk in and close it after me. He's got quite a big yard too, he can build outside-rooms and rent them out, if he was in need of money.

I bang the door with my knuckles. It takes a minute for someone to open. Guess who, the son who ran away. He knows I'm not here to play, he starts tearing up before I even open my mouth.

"What are you doing here?" I untie the lace of my sneaker. He knows what's coming,

he cries louder and get the attention he needed from Nkalipho.

He comes out running, when he sees me holding a shoe and Nzuzo crying in front of me he pulls him away.

“Come on Nondu,” he says.

“I haven’t talked to you yet, I’m coming to you. Wena, you are stealing phones and walking all the way to Gcaleka alone?” If I don’t put an end to this next time it won’t be Nkalipho picking him up, but a complete stranger.

“Don’t hit a child, what’s wrong with you?”

The nerve!

“He’s my child, not yours, let go of him.”

“I will call the police,” he threatens.

I'm shocked. He takes my son and threatens to call the police on me when I want to deal with this the way I want?

"This is my son Nkalipho, I haven't known you for a month and you're here telling me what to do. Are you crazy?"

He exhales heavily and tells Nzuzo to go to the sitting room.

Then he looks at me, "He's afraid."

"Of what?" I ask.

"The ceremony his grandfather is doing for him. Why don't you listen to him? He's told me a lot of things and it makes sense why he's here and not with you, 'his mom'."

I feel like he's coming for my mothering skills, which is very rich of him.

“You’re not worth my energy,” I tell him.

He tries to hold my hand, I pull it back and give him a look.

“I don’t know you, I don’t know what you’ve been through and how it has affected you emotionally. I just know that you’re not in a good state of mind.”

“Wow, so now you’re calling me crazy?” I cannot believe this.

“No, I’m just asking that you come in and try to listen to him before you do something crazy like hitting him with a shoe,” he says.

It’s either I do what he says or stand here and argue with him. I need to go back home, the quicker I do this, the better.

I sit on the couch, he's standing.

“Nzuzo tell mommy why you don't want Mkhulu to kill a chicken for you.”

Nzuzo looks at me, he's still frightened, he thinks I'm going to yank him from that couch and hit him.

“Because he wants to give it my R1,” he says.

R1 again, somebody kill me now!

“There's no R1 he's going to give to the chicken,” I'm calm.

“But he gave the goat and changed my R1,” he says.

I take a deep breath. “He won't do it again.”

Nkalipho gives him a look encouraging him to keep talking.

He stands up and goes to the corner of the room and points on the floor.

“He puts it here and mkhulu’s leaf,” he says.

I look at Nkalipho, I’m completely lost.

“What leaf?” I ask.

“Gogo’s leaf,” he points on the floor, “Here, in his house.”

“Here and in his house? Which one is it?” I ask.

“In the corner of his house, he’s just showing you how it happened,” Nkalipho says, his hand is on my back, his fingers tenderly tapping on me.

“And then?” I ask.

“I don’t want the chicken because he takes Gogo’s leaf and puts it in his house and leaves the other one and gives me a lollipop,” he says.

I’m hearing him, I’m just struggling to understand everything he just said. Maybe Nkalipho was right, I’m not in a good state of mind.

**“Here, go and play in the kitchen,”
Nkalipho gives him his tablet to play with.**

I haven’t reacted, I’m still confused.

He sits next to me as soon as Nzuzo leaves.

“Tell me what happened with R1,” he says.

“Babo needed R1, I didn’t have it so I borrowed Nzuzo’s because he had coins in

his pencil case. I just felt guilty because he had bought the goat with his money and covered other expenses as well,” I say.

“If he could afford all those things why did he need R1?”

I shrug, “Maybe he didn’t have coins.”

“Where did he get them when he suddenly paid it back?”

“I don’t know Nkalipho. I don’t know what to think.”

“Do you think that there’s something dark going on?”

“I don’t know Nkalipho,” my voice breaks.

He shifts closer and hugs me. I’ve never felt so weak, stupid and lost in my life. I find comfort in his arms and shed tears. I’m

crying because now I don't know who my real enemy is.

“My aunt once took me to a Zion church, I was 17, I hated it. But now I looking back, I think their prayers helped me,” he says.

“I have given God a chance Nkalipho, he hasn't come through for me, not even once. I'm not going to any church,” I say.

“Just once, I will go with you. Do this for your son, he's scared of whatever he saw being done. I know it's not easy, you've run out of patience, but just try.”

I release a huge breath. I don't know him well, I don't know if I can trust him, but I need help. I know I will not win this battle on my own. I don't know how far my mother can go, she's very soft and she

doesn't mind giving people thousand chances.

"They're waiting for us," I tell him, getting off his embrace.

"Let's calm down and think of a way forward." He pulls me back to his arms and cuddles me on the couch.

There's a loud bang on the kitchen. It's what you get when you tell a child to go and play in the kitchen. I'm laughing with tears in my eyes, angithi he's better at this parenting thing. He looks at me, our eyes lock and we both crack up and laugh.

"I should've told him to go to the bedroom," he says, gently pushing me to the side.

He hurries off to the kitchen.

I take a deep breath...

What am I going to do?

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 8

Babo doesn't call his wife and tell her Nzuzo has been found right away. He still has a conversation to finish with Thembelihle. She's staring at him, sometimes her stares are cold and sometimes they're affectionate. It's just the

two of them now, he shifts closer and puts his hand on her knee.

“You don’t have to leave tomorrow. What’s the rush? Is there someone waiting for you at home?” He’s insecure, and clingy at times.

“If I did, how would it be your problem?” She loves pushing his buttons as well.

“No, I didn't say there was a problem,” he says, the look on his face contradicting what he says.

“Call your wife, before my sister’s BP rises, they still think Nzuzo is in danger where he is,” she says.

“Just tell me you will see me tonight,” he pleads.

There’s a smile she’s refusing to let out.

“I’m not the one who’s under a wife’s skirts. I won’t have any problems seeing you. It’s you who will need a plan to escape her claws,” she says.

“What makes you think that’s going to be a problem?”

She gives him a look and chortles. He’s scared of his wife; she calls the shots in that marriage, everyone knows it. But if he wants to put on a brave African man mask on his face, she won’t stand on his way.

“Okay Mr Mhlongo, I will wait for your call,” she agrees.

Only then he takes out his phone and calls his wife and tells her they can come back, Nondu has gone to fetch Nzuzo from a friend.

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MaNkosi arrives with Busisekile, they're tired but relieved that Nzuzo has been found. MaNkosi is engulfed by guilt, she was convinced that her sister had something to do with Nzuzo's disappearance, all thanks to Nondu's sangoma. She cannot look at Thembelihle eyes as they walk in, she's ashamed of herself.

“Must I make you a cup of tea?”

Thembelihle asks.

She doesn't know whether this is a test or Thembelihle is being who she naturally is; a caring sister. “Yes, I'd love one,” she says.

Thembelihle goes to the kitchen, leaving her with Babo and Busisekile.

“How did Nzuzo end up in Gcaleka?” – Busisekile.

Babo exhales softly and shrugs. “I’d be lying if I said I know.”

“How far are they now? The ceremony needs to start,” she asks.

“She hasn’t called, we will start whenever they come,” he says and they share a look.

They need this ceremony to happen. Nzuzo is starting to be a problem, he’s not a slow child they thought he was. They should’ve paid him the attention they paid MaNkosi and Nondu. Leaving him in the light while others stayed in the dark was a wrong move.

As soon as MaNkosi goes to her bedroom, it's just the two of them, Busisekile whispers.

“You better make sure this day goes as planned,” she hisses.

“I will,” Babo says and clears his throat.

“Have you talked to Salo?”

“I haven't,” she says. She's had far more important things to do today than calling Salo who's never pleased to get unimportant calls.

“I worry about her MaKhumalo, I won't rest until I've met this man she's going out with.” As much as he's a hard-core Zulu man, he's closer and more open to his daughter than other fathers. He was there when she got her first periods, he helped

her roll a tissue and put it on her panty until Busisekile came back from town and gave her pads. Their relationship isn't always the tightest, but he always wants to be his daughter's king, that one man she can always run to when the world gets too much.

“I'm sure it's just a fling baba, why do you need to meet him? He's not the only man she's gone out with,” Busisekile dismisses his concerns. He worries too much for her liking, he needs to get his priorities straight.

“It's not a fling, from what I heard from her. I think they are even talking about starting a family,” Babo says.

“You know we cannot allow that to happen, Salabenzi has responsibilities

and siblings to take care of. Next thing you will hear she's getting married and going to support another family with the money we worked so hard for her to have.”

Babo takes a deep breath, he doesn't say anything further. He will never go against his wife's word, he knows she wants what's best for the family. Even though he may like to walk his daughter down the aisle one day, he understands how it could affect them if she was to get married. Busisekile agreed that they would let her have her own kids once both their younger children are out of college and able to make their own money. Marriage has never been on the cards. They let her have fun, like any other young woman. But whenever they see a guy getting too close and stirring

towards the direction of marriage and starting a family with her, they make sure that she loses the attractiveness in the man's eye. It's not something she pays attention to, she thinks it's because men are scared of independent women.

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NONDUMEZULU

Nzuzo fell asleep and Nkalipho took him to the bedroom. The sun has set down and I'm still here, I don't know what I should do. Nkalipho proposed that I go home and tell them I've changed my mind, I don't want the ceremony to happen anymore.

But I thought about the backlash and my mom; she would be mad at me and I don't even have a clear explanation. Mam' Busie kept calling, I ended up putting my phone on silent. I never thought there'd be a day in my life when I'm so scared of going home. I fear for my son's life and mine, I don't know who my enemy is. Nzuzo is not making this up; the sangoma told me something close to this. Is it Aunt Teekay or Babo? Or is it both?

I feel his fingers tapping on my back. I'm lying on his lap. Yes, his lap, I don't care how long I've known him or how intimate this looks. At this point I'd rather trust a stranger than my own family.

“You have to make a decision Nondu,” he says, his tone is soft and begging.

I release a deep breath. He’s right, I have to decide whether I go home or not. If I don’t go home, how long am I going to hide and what explanation am I going to give my mother.

Tomorrow I’m working, Nzuzo has to go to school, I don’t have any other choice but to go home and face the music.

“Take me home,” I say to him.

“What are you going to tell them?”

“I will say I got sick, I’m sure Babo cannot perform the ceremony at night. Then tomorrow I will tell him I will refund him whatever money he wasted for the ceremony,” I say.

“Can I ask you something?” I turn and look at him.

He’s such a candy to the eye. When our eyes lock I cannot help but blush and look away.

He chuckles, “I’m serious about this. Please don’t tell them anything about what Nzuzo said. You don’t know why that leaf and R1 were taken. Whoever is responsible for this may want to take him out of the way.”

“Okay, I won’t tell anyone. But what if I don’t ever get a clarification?”

He drops his hand over my left breast. I almost jump but I calm myself down. He’s only doing so because he’s talking about my heart.

“Have faith here, in your heart, and believe that you will get clarification,” he says.

I’m still uncomfortable with his hand on my boob. As if he’s testing how long my patience can go, he doesn’t remove the hand.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you,” he says.

Deep breath! I feel like I know what he wants to say, I’m the one who put myself in an accessible position.

“I don’t want to scare you, I know you’re dealing with stuff and maybe you hardly have time to entertain such things,” he says.

“I’m listening,” I say, clearing my throat.

“When I saw you the first time I wasn’t paying attention to how my heart was beating. It never was a moment of locking eyes with you and seeing my forever in your eyes. I looked at you, we argued, I went home and all I could think of was what I could’ve said and done differently. Thinking I could’ve gone closer, maybe touched your hand, or something. I think you’ve noticed that I’m shy, most of the times I know what to say but I don’t have the guts to say it. How people respond to me worries me, I’m scared of disappointments.” I think he’s going off-topic. How did we go from his confession of thinking about me to his character?

“Okay,” I’m smiling, just to put him at ease.

He holds my hand, very tightly.

Then he clears his throat, “I’m not saying say yes.”

“Say yes to what?” I ask.

“To what I just told you.”

I laugh. “You only told me you couldn’t stop thinking about me and then you started telling me about your shyness.”

“I said I like you,” he says.

“No, you didn’t.” He was trying to say it, but he didn’t voice it out.

“Okay, I like you. My nights have become sunny dawn because of you. I would really love to try love with you, when you’re ready,” he says.

“When I’m ready? Okay.” I don’t know when I will be ready, but having such a handsome man on standby makes me feel the butterflies I haven’t felt in a long time.

“So you’re handsome, driving a nice car and have this great personality, but you are single?” I mean, what is the reason? I don’t believe men just stay single and wait for that one lady who will make their hearts pump hard.

“I’ve been hooking up, if that’s what you’re asking,” he says.

Why am I feeling like strangling someone?

Why did he hook up?

“No solid relationship?” I ask.

“No, not in the last 11 months,” he says.

I'm not dating him but hearing this relieves me in some way. I want my him free of dramatic ex's and not looking at anyone else but me.

"I haven't dated seriously after having Nzuzo. His father did a number one on me; he didn't just hurt me, he made sure I live with bleeding wounds for years." I don't know why I'm saying this. I don't make that idiot a bit deal of my past.

"I'm sorry about that," he says.

Now I'm getting sympathy!

I untangle myself from his cuddle and stand up. It has gotten very late.

"Can you wake Nzuzo up?"

"He doesn't have to wake up. I will carry him to the car."

I cannot hide forever, I need to deal with my reality.

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BABO

His wife walks in, already in her night dress and pantihose on her head. She's beside herself with anger. Babo feels the same way too, they had this perfectly planned out and Nzuzo got in the way as usual. But he's worried more about his plans with Thembelihle more than anything. It's time for bed and he hasn't made a single excuse not to sleep at home tonight. It's easy during the day, he just goes out and claim

to be held up somewhere. At night it's very problematic because he's married, he has to give a solid reason not to sleep home with his wife.

His phone rings. It's MaNkosi.

"Yebo MaNkosi," he answers.

Busisekile lifts her head up and looks at him curiously.

"Njomane I just want to let you know that Nondumezulu has arrived with Nzuzo. I don't know what's going to happen now because she says Nzuzo ran away because he doesn't want the ceremony, so she's pulling out."

Busisekile frowns, she wants the tea but Babo is too slow to understand what she's

whispering. So she snatches the phone to her own ear.

“MaNkosi uthi kwenzenjani?” she asks.

“I’m saying Nondumezulu is pulling Nzuzo out of the ceremony.”

“And why would she tell you that? You make the rules, not her.”

“It’s her child MaKhumalo, not mine,” MaNkosi says.

“You’re allowing a child to dance on top of your head MaNkosi, hhayi suka!” She angrily drops the call. What a weakling!

“What now?” she asks Babo.

He exhales heavily. “Let me go there and sleep over, maybe I will win their trust back.”

“Sleep over where?”

“Not with them in the big-house, remember my brother built a rondavel?” He says with a low chuckle, it was once a joke that his brother built it in the middle of a township, he was among the first ones to do so.

Busisekile doesn’t understand the joke.

There’s nothing funny about her husband sleeping over at a widow’s house when her unmarried sister is around.

“You’re not going there, I will make another plan,” she says.

“But Busi...”

She shoots him a look; how dare he even tries to negotiate this?

“You know what you did yesterday, I need you in bed today, ayidl’ ipapa Njomane.”

Heavy sigh! Thembelihle will have to understand.

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SALO

When you don't have resources, no colorful educational background and no connections, you're likely to fight for survival half, if not the rest, of your life. But she had a breakthrough earlier than anyone expected. She's done all that was expected from her; she took her siblings to school, supported her parents and achieved most of her goals. One goal that is left for her is having her first child before reaching 30.

She never expected to meet Mr Right who will give her the world and propose to her in Las Vegas. To her love never had that huge part of her future, she was going to meet him if he came along.

Little did she know he would come, dressed not in a suit as many girls would dream of, but in sweatpants and not one but three earrings. She's not controlling but within two weeks of them dating the earrings were gone. He always remind her about it when he wants to control her, he calls it a sacrifice that he made for the relationship.

She slept well last night, even though Nzuzo and Nondu gave her a fright in the afternoon. She thought the worst had

happened, only to hear that it's the construction-guy they met in town who took Nzuzo. She's still going to call Nondu and find out what really happened. Calling her mother would be an ask for drama, she only calls her for specific reasons and cut it short.

She wakes up and rushes to the bathroom and releases a long pee. She's waking up with a bitter taste in her mouth lately, she brushes her teeth and feels something rising up to her throat. She rushes and throws up in the toilet. This is strange!

She washes her face and goes back to bed, for extra few minutes of sleep. Then she hears something dropping in the kitchen. There are no rats here, what is that?

She pulls a scissor and tiptoes to the kitchen. No, not her belongings. No thief will come here and steal her things!

Zothani bursts into laughter when he sees her coming in with soft footsteps.

“Is that a scissor?” he asks, still laughing.

She stands, taking a huge breath of relief.

“I could’ve killed you, what are you doing in my kitchen?”

“Here to spoil you with breakfast-in-bed. I don’t want it to be a thing you only experience when you’re in hospital,” he says.

“You didn’t have to baby.” Yes, he had to!

She goes to him and throws her arms around him. Her eyes go to the pan, he’s frying two eggs.

“No, not eggs baby,” she says with her upper lip curled up.

“What’s wrong with eggs? I’m making them the way you love them.”

She takes a step back and looks away from the pan with her hand pressing her nose.

“I don’t want eggs,” she says. She loved them last month, this month is this month.

Zothani gathers a little frown and then smiles.

“My brother is a doctor, I think you’re pregnant,” he says.

She laughs. “It’s not genetic, your brother studied for it. Hating eggs doesn’t mean one is pregnant.”

“But it’s a sign because you loved eggs not so long ago. I think I scored.”

“No ways!” She covers her mouth. Yes, they haven’t been playing it safe, both of them were ready to have a child when they met. But can it happen so soon?

“I think I need to go and buy the tests. What is your choice of breakfast since you don’t want my eggs?” he asks taking his phone and car keys.

“I want muffins from those women who sit at the side of the road.”

Zothani slightly shakes his head and laughs. He did score for real, her wanting muffins is crazy, he needs to prepare himself for the damages payment.

“Go back to bed, I will be back in 10 minutes,” he says and gives her the morning kiss.

It still feels like a dream to him. They haven’t dated for long but he’s what she wants and she’s what he wants. He knew his life would change forever when he met her. And it did, two weeks later he had to let go of his Miansai crux earrings.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 9

NONDUMEZULU

I'm only going to work at 11am, I walked Nzuzo to school and now I'm back to face my reality. I haven't spoken to Aunt Teekay, but anyone can feel the drop of energy between us. She's leaving today, I don't know how I feel about it. I don't know what to think or believe. But I know I have to go and say goodbye because it sounds like she's packed and ready to leave.

I'm still tying my hair, there's a knock at the door of my room.

It's my mother, she walks in with a red face and her arms folded.

"Your aunt is about to leave," she says.

"I'm coming," I say.

She tilts her head to the side and releases a brief sigh.

“I don’t like this at all Nondu. I feel like this whole thing is a mistake, one that we cannot fix when the truth comes out. This is my sister we are talking about, she took care of you when you were a child,” she says.

“I will say goodbye to her Ma.” Honestly, I don’t need this, my head is already buzzing and I’m the one facing dark outcomes if whatever it is that was done to this family.

“Please be nice,” she says.

I look at her, she has dark circles under her eyes. This has been stressful for her as well, I know she feels caught in between the two of us. Aunt Teekay is her only sister and

I'm her only daughter, this could end with her losing one of us.

"I will be nice, don't worry," I brush her arm and walk out, leaving her in my room.

When she hears me coming Aunt Teekay looks up, she's on the couch with her bags lying next to her feet on the floor. I sit on the single-seater and look at the TV, failing dismally to look at her in the eyes.

"I guess Nzuzo won't be visiting for school holidays this season," she says. I cannot tell the emotions carried by her tone but I know this is not us; the normal niece and aunt.

"It will depend," I say.

“You know that I know you, right? I carried you on my back, changed your napkins and wiped your ass. I don’t know what is happening or what you heard, but I will find out and you and I will have a serious problem.”

I raise my eyes, “Serious problem?”

“You’re still a child, you will always be. I will have a problem with you for not addressing whatever the issue is with me and I will have a problem with the attitude you’ve been giving me and those raised eyebrows. You’re not too big for me, you never will be.”

I compose my face, if there’s one thing I know is that she’s good at throwing hands and I’m not. Also, I will not tell her what’s

going on because this is not a light issue and I don't know the real truth yet.

"I just came here to say goodbye," I say.

"No, I'm waiting for you. You will help me with the bags to the rank on your way to work," she says.

My eyebrows are up again. I have a handsome gentleman asking me out these days, I cannot be walking to the rank with her Mashangane bag, no!

"I'm getting in late, at 10," I say.

She looks at her phone, checking the time.

"10 is fine, it's just an hour away," she says.

Can someone come and kidnap me now?

What is in the other bag? One has clothes,

the other one is filled up with avocado and maize seeds from my mother.

There's someone at the door. The knock brings an end to our awkward conversation, I go to the door and open, and I regret it as soon as I see who it is.

“You're still home?” he asks.

“Yes, I'm starting at 10.” This is awkward, I'm sure he's here to confront me about the canceled ceremony. I haven't prepared anything that's going to make sense in my defence, I just know that I won't allow the ceremony to happen anymore.

“You and I still need to talk,” he says.

Still need to? Okay, he's not here for me.

His eyes are on someone as we make our way inside the lounge. He's looking at Aunt Teekay and her bags. My head goes back to their friendly conversation that I walked on to yesterday.

“MaNkosi you're leaving already?” he asks.

Aunt Teekay briefly looks at him and then looks away.

“Yes, I am,” she sounds a bit cold.

“So many bags, you won't get to the rank with them. Let me call Shange to come with the van,” he says.

I don't think these only two bags need Shange's van, but anything to save me from going to the rank with her and her Mashangane bags.

“That would be great Babo,” I say and earn a stern look from her.

“It won’t be necessary,” she says.

Babo smiles awkwardly, almost like he’s intimidated by her.

“I insist, my brother’s wife wouldn’t forgive me if I let you suffer.”

My mother comes in just as she becomes a subject. She greets Babo and he immediately tells her about the van offer he’s giving Aunt Teekay. He’s making himself sound like a life saver and my mother cannot stop praising his kindness.

“Now you have gotten easy feet,” she says to Aunt Teekay.

“Yes, but I already had a plan.” Her plan was me carrying her bags to the rank. It was a bad one.

Babo steps outside to call Shange. Aunt Teekay doesn't look impressed at all but we have ganged up on her, she cannot turn down the offer.

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BABO

He's known Thembelihle since he was 19, their relationship was forced to that of brother and sister after his brother married MaNkosi. He was attracted to her but he couldn't act on those feelings because it

would've put another strain on his and brother's relationship.

They didn't get along as brothers, there was no specific reason except that he felt inferior to him. Their parents didn't intervene, they decided to take a side. He wasn't surprised when they sided with his brother instead of him because he grew up knowing that he wasn't anyone's favourite. Maybe that also contributed to the feud he had with his brother. It was him and their sister who was a middle child, they gravitated to one another until her death. She passed before her 20th birthday, leaving him feeling all alone. Busisekile saved him from a lot, they dated for two years before he asked for her hand in marriage. At that time his relationship with

his old brother was almost nonexistent, which put him at a distance from the Nkosi sisters as well.

He forgot about Thembelihle until she attended his brother's funeral 9 years ago.

She's here, sitting next to him and staring outside the window, mad at him. He understands why, but he's a married man, sometimes things won't go as planned.

Shange pulls up in front of his old house in Dark City, he knows the situation between his friend and his sister-in-law. He drops them off and hands Babo the house keys and drives off.

“You're still mad at me?” he asks.

Thembelihle turns her eyes, she looks at him and heaves a low sigh.

He walks on and opens the door, they walk in with her bags. They always come here, it's safer and private for their situation.

For Thembelihle it has never been love, although Babo made his feelings known to her right after his brother's funeral. For her he's a safe game; married with a child.

There's nothing much he'd require from her, she gets to have some warm company and he gets a few hours away from his wife's cuffs, it's a win-win situation .

He leaves her on the couch in the living room and goes to the kitchen to get drinks. When he comes back she looks a bit calm.

“I’m sorry about yesterday, she wouldn’t let me go,” he says.

“I did tell you that she will keep you under her skirts.” There’s slight mockery in her voice. He’s scared of his wife, maybe that’s evident for everyone.

“I’m here now,” he says, taking a sip from his drink.

“You know that I have to go, right?”

“Tomorrow, yes I know.”

She laughs, obviously he would try that with her- authority.

“How is your daughter?” she asks.

“Salo is fine, she’s working nonstop,” he says.

She nods, her eyes locked into his. “It must be great having such a helpful daughter.

That’s what every parent want, I guess, a child who grows up and takes care of you.”

“I just want her to be happy,” he says anguishly.

“Do you think she is?” Thembelihle throws her foot on his lap and sips her drink with her gaze on his face.

“I hope she is,” he says and drops his eyes. A few lines wrinkle his forehead, his pink finger draws a map on the glass he’s holding.

Thembelihle’s eyes grow with interest but she doesn’t want to push. He has to trust her first, that’s where she wants him, then

maybe she can get to the bottom of the whole chaos around the ceremony.

“She’s your only child Delani; your princess. More than anyone you know how tough it can be having a parent who doesn’t put your happiness first,” she says.

Babo lifts his eyes to her, she’s touching wounds that he covered a long time ago.

Thembelihle stretches a smile and puts her drink down and comes closer to lean on his shoulder. He puts away his drink and embraces her, his pink finger is still restless; tapping on her arm softly .

“It’s a torture to be the one that tries the hardest and gets noticed the least,” she says. This is something he would relate to the most.

"What makes you say that?" he asks.

"26 years ago I met a boy, I was already broken inside, in ways I couldn't explain at 15. I didn't know when his started but he was broken too, when our eyes met I felt something strange happening to me. He said nothing but his eyes said so much. I longed for him but we couldn't be close to each other, so young and guarded by our older siblings. He disappeared for three years and came back with another woman, a beautiful one who made him smile and gain back his confidence. We were not meant to be, I guess. Piece by piece I broke, but who I was to fight for something that was never mine? I let it go, I lived in pain and hoped one day it would get better."

He's staring at her, when she finally pauses she looks at him, there's an emotion he's always wanted to see in her eyes. His eyes flutter, he grabs her hand.

"Did it get better?" he asks, his voice lowered.

"No, it didn't Delani. I was better a no-option than a second-option. But it's life, I have learned to embrace it," she says.

"You were in love with me?" He's trying to wrap his head around it. His late teens and early twenties were occupied by this woman in his head, to hear that she thought about him too is something he's always needed to hear.

"Yes, I was," she says.

“But you said you didn’t remember me at my brother’s funeral.”

Thembelihle chuckles, “Did that hurt you?”

“It did, because I remembered you, I will never forget you.”

“Really?” she’s smiling.

“There’s so much likeness between you and Smangele. When I first met you it was just 4 months after her death, I was broken and scared, I felt all alone.” His voice shakes, he doesn’t like talking about his sister, she’s a subject he hardly touches on.

“I’m like her?” Thembelihle asks, squeezing his hand tightly.

“I don’t know, maybe I was looking for her and saw her in you for some reason. I wanted to be closer to you but my brother

put a distance between us.” He still hates his brother, especially for not caring enough when Smangele died. Everyone forgot her, a month after her death they were cleansed and life moved on like nothing happened.

“Do you miss her?” – Thembelihle.

“Everyday,” he says.

She looks at his eyes again, they’re pricking with tears.

“Sometimes it’s hard,” he says, blinking back heavily.

“What’s hard sthandwa sami?”

Thembelihle’s hand runs over his chest that’s bouncing up and down. He’s vulnerable now.

“Family, marriage, everything. Sometimes I don’t want to do it but have to hold it together because that’s what a man does,” he says.

“You don’t have to do something that you don’t want to do. You know that, right?” She’s wiping the corners of his eyes.

“I have to protect my family,” he says.

“And I want to protect you.” She sits on his lap and wraps her arms around him. Deep down he has a good heart, they’ve had a few good chapters of life together, while the earlier love confession wasn’t true but one thing she said wasn’t a lie. Looking in his eyes again at mid-forties, he’s still that young broken boy he was at 19.

She captures his quivering lower lip and passionately kisses him. He's still not okay but he kisses her back. She grabs his neck, the kiss gets more intense. His big-man grows hard beneath her, she purposely grinds on him with her dress on.

She breaks the kiss and whispers against his ear, "I'm here for you Delani."

His eyes are bloodshot, when they meet with hers he swallows hard and nods . He's a good-looking man, well taken care of by his wife and always looking neat. He smells good, she buries his head on his chest and sniffs him.

He chuckles; he's happy and free from his reality for a few hours. He still loves his wife, he probably will always love her, but

marriage has gotten heavier than he anticipated.

“I have missed you,” he tells Thembelihle.

She smiles, “Really?”

“Yeah,” he licks his lips.

Salivating much? She gets off him and takes her dress off. When she unhooks her bra her firm breasts points at him. He grabs her closer and pulls down her black tight. His big-man is hard and throbbing. He wants to shove it inside her and release himself.

Busisekile always fights him for his lack of romance, over the years she’s initiated the facesitting technique that always makes her wet and ready for him. Basically, she asks him to lie on his back and then sits on his face and grinds her coochie all over him

until she's wet enough to accommodate his big man. Before that he used to finger her, she grew out of it and said his fingers are rough.

With Thembelihle he's always in control, she usually gets ready from them kissing.

He's gotten her naked, she's standing in front of him, her arms around his neck.

He's squeezing her hips and telling her how much he missed being with her. Sometimes he acts like a teenager he saw over two decades ago; he speaks shyly and says things a grown man normally wouldn't say.

"Sizogangela la?" he's talking about the couch.

Yeah, he calls it like that.

Thembelihle smiles, "You prefer a bed?"

“I prefer you,” he says.

And sometimes he says the sweetest things.

“Okay then,” Thembelihle kneels and holds onto his waist.

He looks a bit confused. He wants her to lie on her back and open her legs for him. But she’s pulling down his pants and boxers and taking out his hard big-man. She lowers her head and licks its tip. A blowjob? His birthday must’ve come early, he only gets this from Busisekile on his birthdays. It’s nice, he enjoys it, but he also enjoys the coochie, so it’s never a big deal. But this one is swallowing his whole penis to her throat and gagging on it, then she licks down his balls and sucks his tip like she’s trying to suck out his insides.

**“You’re hurting me MaNkosi,
uyangilimaza!” he says and moans deeply.**

**Thembelihle lifts her head, her hand wraps
around his big-man and strokes it.**

“I’m hurting you?” she asks.

**“Yeah, kamnandi!” He’s opening his mouth
widely and closing his eyes as she strokes
him faster. Then she lowers her head and
sucks his tip again.**

**“Awwww!” he’s restless, when it’s him
who’s in control of his big-man he knows
when to slow down to avoid early
ejaculation. But here he’s not in charge, it’s
her mouth, her pace. He can feel his body
wanting to give in.**

**“Uzongichamisa ngingasalifakanga,” he
says in a shaky voice trying to squeeze his**

muscles to stay in control. Instead of letting him inside her as he wants, Thembelihle slides down her finger to his bunghole.

“The...thembe...hhayi!” He swallows that with her finger inserted in his hole. He’s scared to move his body and run away, she takes his big-man down her throat again and presses her finger on the gland deep in his anus. His big-man shoots up, she moves away just in time. He releases some gas well, his scream is loud enough to be heard on the streets.

He lies with his legs spread out, his chest bouncing and breaths heavy. His big-man is lying on his thigh like a rotting banana.

“Still want to be inside?” Thembelihle asks with a smirk.

He lifts his hand to touch her hip but his arm trembles and falls back on the couch.

She laughs and leans over for a kiss. “I’m here for you Delani, I’m listening, I care, I love you.”

“Please don’t leave today,” he says, finally back in control of his body.

“Why? You don’t want to go home?”

“I’m tired,” he says.

Deep breath! If it means spending a night, so be it.

What is he tired of?

CHAPTER 10

AUNT TEEKAY

She's lying on his chest, her fingers linked into his. His breaths have calmed down, he's resting his chin on top of her head, completely vulnerable. He releases a sharp breath, agony piercing every part of his heart.

"I miss my children," he says.

"The other two? When did you last see them?"

"They're at boarding school, they didn't come home for school holidays in December, they were at the Khumalos. I miss them," he says.

“If you’re their father why didn’t you make a decision regarding where they stayed during the holidays?” Thembelihle asks.

“Khumalo wanted them to visit,” he says. Khumalo is their uncle, Busisekile’s brother. He hasn’t seen his son and younger daughter in months. He longs to see them but he understands, Busisekile explained to him why.

“They don’t look like you,” Thembelihle says with a giggle escaping her mouth. She quickly pulls herself together and says, “At least Salo comes home, she attends every ceremony and doesn’t get shipped away during holidays.”

“Yeah, she’s older,” Babo says, he’s in his own world.

Thembelihle takes a deep breath. “I don’t have children but I know how it’s like to love a child. I love Nondu like she’s my own daughter. Seeing us grow apart is slowly killing me. I don’t know what she heard about me, I only hope that one day someone will care and love me enough to tell me what’s going on.”

“What makes you think there’s something going on?” – Babo.

“Because I’m not stupid Delani. She went to your house, next morning she was going somewhere, when she came back she couldn’t look at me in the eyes.”

Babo playfully presses her finger joints.

“Maybe she was just tired,” he says.

“That’s bull Delani, you know it. Something happened but everyone is keeping me in the dark. I don’t know who to trust, even you,” she says, getting off his embrace.

“You can trust me,” he says pulling her back to his chest.

She’s glaring at him; not giving in to his pleading eyes.

“Do you love me?” she asks.

He nods, she knows very well that he wouldn’t take these risks for anyone else.

“Then tell me what happened,” she says.

“I don’t know anything Thembelihle, Nondu didn’t say anything about your relationship falling apart, I thought you two were okay.” He tries to keep his expression hard and convincing, but she knows where

to look to get answers. His eyes always tell the story.

“I’m leaving,” she stands and picks her dress and puts it on.

“But you agreed to sleep here,” he says getting up on his feet.

“That was when I thought you cared about me. But clearly I was lying to myself, you don’t mind watching me lose the people I love while you know very well that you and I can never be family, I’m just a basket for your sperms that you only remember when your wife shows you flames.” Things have escalated in just a few minutes. Babo is confused, they were happy, they had sex, she confessed that she loved him 26 years ago.

“I care about you MaNkosi,” he says, butt-naked in front her trying to block her way.

“You don’t,” she insists, her teary eyes fixed on him.

He doesn’t want to see her crying, at least not in front of him. He’s done bad things to her, right now looking at her about to break down feels like he’s looking at Smangele.

How can he hurt her like that?

“It...it...was me,” he stammers.

“It was you?” Confusing dwells across Thembelihle’s face.

“I didn’t want it to be you, MaKhumalo said you were a better option. I was just trying to protect my family, I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He’s scared, losing her would make his life even more miserable.

“What are you talking about?”

“The things we did to your sister and Nondu. It wasn’t my idea, we used your picture to hide our faces so that it wouldn’t show when they went to seek from a sangoma.”

Okay, witchcraft. Now she gets it. Shocked, yes. But she needs to handle this like a pro, right now he’s eating from the palm of her hand.

“What did you do to my sister and my niece?” She’s calm, however inside she’s bursting with flames of anger. It makes perfect sense now, Nondu has been distancing herself from her because she found out that she’s being bewitched.

“Can we please sit down?” He holds her hand, she allows him to pull her back to the couch. They sit, she’s uncomfortable next to him but she endures it.

“Tell me, what did you do to them?” She still sounds calm, like she won’t be going on a revenge spree from here. Yes, they will pay for everything they’ve done.

“I was just helping my family. We blocked things from going to the main house, especially to...to Nondumezulu. It was either her or Salo. I had to choose my daughter. We also took my parents’ spirits and had them working exclusively for us. And then my brother’s, recently,” he says. She’s shocked, but she stays calm.

“So they have no ancestors in my sister’s house? Everything they have done for the ancestors has been for nothing,” she asks.

“Things were not going well, I have three children Thembelihle,” he says.

Inside she’s screaming; this explanation is bullshit.

“So my sister had to suffer?” she asks, her voice lowered.

“I...I try to help,” he knows it won’t make any sense. “I didn’t think things would get this far. I wanted to stop but I couldn’t, because my family would’ve suffered.”

“How far are you willing to go for ‘your family’ Delani?”

He doesn’t have an answer, he just looks at her like he’s the victim in all of this.

“You said you love me but you have been doing this to my niece?” She’s breaking down, something she didn’t intend to do. She’s never imagined him lying to her about his feelings. She didn’t hold on to them but knowing that he still loves her the way he did 26 years ago gave her some comfort. But now it looks like she was played, maybe him sleeping with her has been part of the game all this time.

“I do love you Thembelihle, you know that.” He sounds broken, he wants to hold her hands but she’s refusing.

“You framed me. What kind of love is that? You’re sick Delani. You deserve your wife, I actually regret all the time I’ve spent thinking about you and cherishing the

memories I thought we were creating together.”

He’s still naked, he stands and blocks her from leaving the lounge.

“Please understand me,” he begs.

She looks at him with her teary eyes squinted.

“You’re unbelievable!” she says.

“I will do anything you want, just don’t leave me.”

“Was this part of your plan with your wife? Us meeting here and fucking?”

“She doesn’t know that, she doesn’t know about us, you’re my safe place.”

“The safe place that you framed and planned to destroy?”

He shakes his head, “That’s not true, I love you.”

“You love me? Can you undo what you have done?”

Silence...

“Then I can’t trust you Delani, never will I ever allow you anywhere near me or my sister’s family,” she pushes him aside.

Only a two strides, he’s got her again.

Tears are rolling down his cheeks, he really knows how to play the victim card.

“I can try to undo it,” he says.

“Is your wife going to be happy about that?”

He’s quiet. She thought as much!

“Understand that I cannot just trust a witch Delani. Give me something, show me that you’re going to help me get my sister’s family back to where it was before you and your wife messed with their altar,” she says.

Right now the thought of losing her is bigger than any fear he has of his family breaking apart or struggling. He doesn’t hear his wife’s voice in his head telling him everything he does is for the goodness of their family. He wants this woman in front of him, just one night away from his reality.

“I can fetch Nondumezulu’s hat,” he says.

Thembelihle frowns. “What hat?”

“She wore it when she was younger.”

She can't help but exhale heavily. It's a lot, the fact that she's still standing next to this man means she's a brave woman. Does he fly with brooms at night? Chances are low, he's probably now the vice-president of witches, sitting in the witchcraft head office and implementing new witching techniques.

"If you just agree to spend the night with me," he says. He's begging, not throwing an ultimatum as it sounds. So it means she will have to open her legs and let this dark man pound her all night.

Deep sigh...

"Okay, I will stay, go and come back," she says.

He smiles and leans over for a kiss. She turns her face away, he only kisses her cheek. It's enough for him though.

“You're helping me all the way, that means you will be truthful and willing to cooperate and lead me to every door that you closed,” she says.

He nods, “Okay.”

“Are you going to do that because you want access to my vagina or because you regret what you've done?” she asks.

“I didn't want things to be this way, I thought I'd be in control,” he says.

“Answer me Delani!”

“Both. Because I love you and because I care about MaNkosi and Nondumezulu.”

She takes another deep breath. She needs to convince him that they'll be okay after this, that she's got his back and she loves him so much.

“I will be your safe space, I will always come whenever you need me, and I will always suck your big-man,” she says the last part with a seductive smile.

“No finger though,” he says.

They both laugh. He's just being a man, thinking being stimulated at the back makes him somehow gay.

“Fine, I won't do it again,” she says.

He smiles, “Can you give me a kiss?”

Deep breath...

She kisses his cheek, sadness dwells across his eyes.

“You’re still angry?”

“No,” she gets closer and wraps her arms around him. They kiss, this time intensely and passionately. His hands are on her butt, she knows by the intensity of his breaths that he’s getting to the point where he won’t let her go until she gives him another round.

She pulls back, “We can do this later, you still have to go home and lie to your wife so that you can come back and spend the night.”

“I just...kancane nje,” he begs, rubbing her palm against her right thigh.

“Delani!” she’s laughi’t know how life with you could’ve turned out,” he’s smiling for a second. Then it disappears, he’s looking at her with evident distress on his face. “I always wonder,” he says.

“You wouldn’t have gotten your daughter,” she says.

“Maybe, maybe not,” he says.

“I cannot have children, so there’s no ‘maybe’. At least Busisekile gave you a daughter,” she says.

“Two daughters and one son.”

Thembelihle chuckles, “Yeah, right.”

“Let me dress up and go because you don’t want to give me your sugar. I will be back shortly with food,” he says and picks up his clothes from the floor.

Thembelihle sits and watches him as he gets dressed. He's well-built, candy to the eye and all that, but she cannot put what she just discovered about him to rest. His heart is not beautiful as his face.

"What are you going to tell her?" she asks.

"I will have one of my friends calling me saying there's an emergency."

She laughs, there's always a chance of change of plans but today he looks very pussified, he's definitely coming back. It's going to be a long night, but if he comes back with a hat she recognizes then she will give him the benefit of a doubt. But one thing that's for sure is that after he's done discovering the truth and what the way

forward is as far as helping her niece is concerned, she will cut ties with this man.

But she wears a smile, kisses his cheek and walks him to the door.

“20 minutes only, I will be back,” he says.

“I’m counting. Don’t get caught,” she says.

He laughs and hugs her goodbye.

She’s never been bothered by the standards and values of what a woman’s behavior is.

She does what Thembelihle wants, no fucks given about what doesn’t dent her not-so-big bank account.

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BUSISEKILE

She's sitting on the couch catching up on her favourite TV shows when her husband makes his way in. He's been gone since morning, he didn't bother telling her where he was, and now he's walking in with his eyes dropped on the floor like a puppy that just stole a piece of meat.

"Where were you Njomane?" she asks.

"I was with Shange," he says.

She looks at him, from head to toe, and shakes her head.

"Your food is in the microwave," she tells him.

He fetches it and comes back to sit next to her. He cannot look at her in the eyes or enjoy this meal while Thembelihle hasn't

eaten anything where she is. Shange is not calling, he told him to wait a few minutes and then make a call.

Busisekile is looking at him through the corner of her eye.

His phone rings, the plate in his hand almost slips and fall as he jumps to answer.

“Shange what’s wrong?” he asks.

The call is on loud speaker, Shange says one of her cousins has been shot in Durban he needs someone who can go with him.

“Is it bad?” – Babo.

“It is, but we will see when we get there.”

“Don’t worry, you always come through for me, I’m packing my small bag and coming right now,” Babo says.

Shange drops the call, he stuffs the remaining food in his mouth.

“This was delicious,” he says.

Busisekile smiles and turns her eyes to the TV.

“Shange’s cousin has been shot, I have to go with him to Durban.”

“Yeah, I heard that,” she says.

“You’re okay with it?” He’s a bit confused, usually she throws a fit before allowing him to go anywhere.

“Yeah, I will pack for you,” she pauses the TV and stands.

Babo looks shocked.

She smiles at him and goes to their bedroom.

Now this is a perfect opportunity for him to go and get Nondu's hat. They got it from Salo's bag, they were coming from the beach, she must've misplaced it or borrowed it to Salo. It's not the only piece of cloth of hers that they have but it has been worked on the most because it used to be something she wore often.

It's kept inside a small container, she gets it from their secret location and put it in a small plastic bag he gets from the kitchen.

Busisekile walks out of the bedroom with his bag. She's packed his toiletries and some clothes. "Njomane!"

He emerges from the kitchen. "Oh, you're done."

“Yes, I am, come here.” She says as she makes her way back to the couch with his bag.

He walks in, looking a bit shaken. Does she suspect anything?

She looks at him, not smiling anymore.

“I can see the label tag of your boxers from the back,” she says.

He frowns and touches his back, his heart starts racing.

“You went to chill with Shange and came back wearing your boxers inside-out?”

He’s sweating, this is not the first time he’s been caught but today is different because a lot is at stake on his side.

“I must’ve worn it wrongly after using the bathroom,” he says.

“You take your pants and boxers off when using a bathroom now? I’m not stupid Njomane, we’ve been here before, I know you. So who was it? Your childhood crush?”

He swallows hard and looks away.

“Delani!” she screams.

He looks at her, “Yes.”

“It was her?” She wants to confirm.

“Yes,” he nods shamefully.

“Nx, that barren! What is in that plastic bag?”

Shit, he should’ve went and hid it somewhere.

“My...my things,” he stutters, batting his eyelashes.

“Give that to me,” she demands.

He stands still. She raises her eyes, he doesn't obey.

“I will pack my things and leave this house Delani. Do you know how many men would kill to have a wife like me? Do you know how much your children would hate you if they find out what you've been doing to me? You don't want to have a family anymore?”

His family is everything, she knows he would die for them.

So he tells her the truth;

“I took Nondu's hat that we use, Thembelihle wants it.”

If she slaps this man God forbid!

“What did you tell her?” she asks.

“Everything,” he’s ashamed of himself.

Unbelievable!

“So you’re ready to destroy your family for her smelly vagina? I mean, you’d rather lose us for her?” she asks.

“No, I don’t want to lose my family.”

“Then protect us Njomane. Put your sexual fantasies last and us first. You know what you have to do now, right?”

“I will tell her I wasn’t telling her the truth.”

Busisekile chuckles, “You think she’s stupid? Well, she is, but not to that extent. You have given her too much information

and I know she's on her way to tell her sister and Nondumezulu."

"No, she's not." He clears his throat and looks down covered in shame, "I'm going to her at Shange's Dark City house."

"Good!" she says.

His eyes widen. He's about to cheat on her again and this is what she says?

"That gives you a chance to save your family," she says.

His eyebrow rises, "How?"

"Kill her, I will pack you some food to give to her."

"No MaKhumalo, no!"

"You killed your brother for me and your children. She's just a stupid woman you

had a crush on when you were a child, get a grip!”

“Please Mntungwa, let’s find another way to deal with this.”

“Look at me Njomane,” she orders.

He looks at her, his heart is racing.

“Remember, you’re doing this to protect your family. You never had anyone protecting you, we are all that you have, we bring you joy. And that crush of yours has never loved you, she can never give you children and put up with you the way I do.”

He blinks rapidly. It hurts but everything she just stated is facts.

He nods, “Okay.”

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 11

He's back earlier than she expected, with his overnight bag and food containers. It's really strange that his wife packed him food for his 'friend's emergency'. She's freshened up and changed to an A-line maxi dress and sandals, she's relaxed on the couch watching a cook show. She needed to watch something to distract her mind, tonight is going to be different from any other night that she's ever spent with Babo.

“You look beautiful,” he compliments, staring at her flawless face covered by strands of her natural hair. Thembelihle has always been a feisty-looking woman, but luckily for him he’s learnt how to navigate his way around her to get to her softest spots.

“Thank you. Is that home-cooked food?” she asks.

He’s putting food-containers on the coffee-table, avoiding eye contact.

“Yes, rice and beef,” he says and clears his throat.

“Take it to the kitchen,” she says.

“Are you not hungry?” He looks at her before his eyes quickly shift to the wall.

“I am, but I’m not going to eat your wife’s food. I thought you’d buy us food.”

“She wasn’t home, so I thought it’s better if I just dish instead of wasting time going to town for food,” he says.

“Fine, you can warm it up, but I’m still craving for chicken and garlic bread.”

He exhales in relief and takes food to the kitchen. He dishes for her on a plate and warms it up in the microwave and serves her on the couch.

“You’re not eating?” she asks with a slight frown.

He smiles to put her at ease and shakes his head. This caring side of her reminds him so much of his sister. She wasn’t the hugging type, she didn’t console you and

say things will be okay. She was firm in her honesty and support. Maybe that's why she never got the princess treatment from their parents; she was not a typical baby girl in the family. She did not need their protection, she could protect herself and her younger brother. Smangele left soon, way too soon.

His eyes turn to Thembelihle, she's chewing.

His eyes bulge all out. "Nooooo!"

Thembelihle looks at him, confused. The beef stew is good, she's pushing another spoon in her mouth, before she knows it Babo grabs the plate from her hands and throws it on the floor. Food spills all over the floor, the plate breaks into pieces.

“Delani!” she’s in shock.

“You ate it?” He has a hard time processing it.

“What do you mean?” – Thembelihle, still in confusion.

“We need to go,” he forcefully pulls her hand.

This is Thembelihle, she won’t go anywhere unless she’s told where she’s being taken to. Babo’s hands are shaking, his body is warm, there’s a thick drop of sweat running down his spine.

“There’s poison in that food,” he confesses.

Thembelihle’s eyes widen, her heart starts racing. She should’ve listened to her instincts, she didn’t want to eat his home-cooked meal but somehow he managed to

convince her to eat. She should've known better!

“You poisoned me?” Her hand is on her chest, there's no pain yet, it's just her mind playing tricks on her.

“She knows Thembelihle, she knows!” he recites breathlessly.

Thembelihle curses below her breath and sits back on the couch. She's scared, but more than everything angry.

“Delani, you are killing me? I'm going to take my last breath because of you?” She turns her eyes to him, they're blood-shot and evident of hurt.

“Let's go sthandwa sami, we still have time,” he begs in a breaking voice.

She shakes her head. “No, I want to call my sister.”

“You’re not dying, I know someone who has crocodile fat, you’re not going to die.”

His mind is clearer than it was when he left his house. He doesn’t want Thembelihle to die. Why must protecting his wife and kids always mean hurting someone else? Salo wouldn’t approve of anything he’s done. He needs to stop, Busisekile needs to stop too, they’ve taken it too far already.

“Delani, I want to call my sister,” she says in a firm tone.

Deep sigh! For her to agree to go with him to the nyanga that’s going to help her, he needs to obey this one instruction. He takes out his phone and looks for MaNkosi’s

number. Right now all he wants is for her to live, he care less about her confessing everything to her sister. The truth was going to come out one day anyway.

MaNkosi answers, he passes the phone to Thembelihle who wastes no airtime before telling her sister what's going on:

“If anything happens please know that Delani and his wife killed me. They've been bewitching you and Nondumezulu.” She's talking fast, like she's going to run out of breath soon.

“Calm down and tell me what's going on? Are you not supposed to be in a taxi home?” – MaNkosi.

“No, just listen to what I'm telling you. You need to see a traditional healer, tell him

what I'm telling you right now, it's the truth," Thembelihle says.

"Tell me where you are." Now MaNkosi is panicking.

Babo snatches the phone before Thembelihle answers. He cancels it and lifts her off the couch, she's not that heavy to carry, he can make it to the taxi-stop with her.

As he runs out of Shange's house with unmarried woman in his arms people stop dead on their tracks and watch. Younger ones grab their phones and record for their social updates. Everyone knows who he's married to, his wife is a member of every stokvel there is around, and she's a loud mouth.

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SALO MHLONGO

Scrolling down your newsfeed and bumping into a video of your father with another woman is not something any child would want to see. It's captioned; Carrying Your Sidechick The Bridal Style. When I zoom in to the video I'm able to recognize the woman. The one and only Aunt Teekay. On my side I've never had an aunt, my father's sister died before any of us were born, and at the Khumalo side I only have an uncle. Aunt Teekay is the only thing close to an aunt that I've ever had. She bosses

everyone around when she's at Nondu's house. She shouts and calls people lazy but still doesn't allow anyone to do any work. She's a hard-faced woman, yet soft as a marshmallow in the inside. I did not expect a woman like her to be a home-wrecker. Although I'm saddened by this I don't think it's my place as a child to confront my father, unless my mother opens up to me and asks for my help. Right now I just need to stay out of social networks and pretend like nothing happened.

I have a lot of positive things that I can focus on right now. I'm having a baby! It still feels like I'm in a dream and someone will wake me up and take me out of this bubble. I know it's strange for an unmarried woman to want a baby badly as

I did. I never obsessed over marriage the way I did over having my first child before 30. Whether Zothani stays or leave, he's given me the precious gift that I'm going to die loving and protecting with all that I have. He's here, busy in the kitchen. He spends more time here these days. I think he just wants to monitor me, this is the first time he's ever made anyone pregnant in 36 years of his life, you can understand the excitement.

He walks in with a plate of creamy pasta and crispy mushrooms. Yes, operation feed-a-pregnant-woman has started. It's going to be long nine months!

"Thank you baby," I afford him a smile. My mind is still on that video of my dad, did he

really need to cheat publicly? With Aunt Teekay out of all people?

He sits next to me, I realize his eyes have been glued on me.

“You’re not okay. What’s up?” The way he reads me sometimes shock me.

I still don’t know him when he’s sad and angry. Our relationship is not necessarily that new but we still have a long way to go; there’s a lot that I still need to learn about him.

“Nothing, I was just hungry,” I say. There’s no way I’m going to tell him that my father is cheating on my mother with his sister-in-law’s sister.

“Okay, eat up quickly, I want us to go and see Nkatha,” he says.

Now what are we seeing his brother for? I love Nkatha, with his absent smile and interrogative tone, but visiting him twice in a week, really? He's a general practitioner residing in Brettenwood. I just don't think he's friendly, which makes me wonder how he gets through his patients with that hard face everyday.

"I hope not for another pregnancy check-up," I say.

"No, just for family matters," he says.

Now I'm included in family matters? Too early to celebrate Salo, get a grip.

"Is he going to smile today?" I ask.

He laughs, "You don't like my brother, do you?"

"No, I don't," I'm being honest.

He laughs harder, I guess it's not that much of a shock that I don't, he knows his brother. How I love him and not his brother whereas they look so much alike is not that hard to work out. Zothani is charming, he's always full of energy and has a great sense of humor, even when he irritates me I put up with him. He's a bit older than me, 9 years older actually. I've always had a thing for older men, I'm one of those who believe maturity comes with age, hence I was disappointed by the three earrings he was wearing when I first met him. And I love them dark-skinned with broad shoulders and some muscles. He can punch people for me on the streets, that's a goal.

“You’ll get to understand him, he’s the uncle of your child,” he says and rubs my tummy.

He comes from what I call a stable home. Married parents, high-profession-holders siblings, spiritually grounded.

“Is he happy in life?” I ask.

He’s laughing at me again.

“I don’t know,” he says.

“You should teach him how to smile.

Imagine being dark and not smiling, at that time you’re a whole doctor!” I may sound judgmental but his brother is so much of a mystery. Of course he finds this whole thing hilarious.

“Once he warms up to you, you’ll understand him better,” he says.

I take the plate back to the kitchen and come back to dress up. I still want to look good, before my feet swell and look like a tortoise.

He helps me zip my dress at the back, then he flashes a smile through the mirror reflection. I turn my head and give him a kiss.

I'm in love with this person. I just hope my family will accept him, I know my mother could be hard on him now that he's going to be presented to them as a babydaddy.

I'm not sure she's thought of herself becoming a grandmother, MaKhumalo can be a diva.

I haven't been to Nkatha's house, I've only been to his work place. Well, it's an upmarket estate with 24 hours security, he's a doctor. There's a rim flow pool at the front, his white Velar is parked in front of the garage, I guess he just came home or he's about to go somewhere. I'm a bit uneasy, when he told me I was pregnant he didn't show any emotions or shared his brother's excitement. He's been strictly professional about everything, cold even. I don't know what to expect now that we are here to discuss family matters, he cannot wear his white coat and cold expression, can he?

We are greeted by a mid-aged woman taking out trash. She's wearing a domestic worker's uniform, so he has a helper. What else? Does he have a woman helping him in the bedroom?

We proceed to the sitting room, Zothani is holding my hand, his brother is in the middle of his meal. I gree first, very wobbly, nerves!

He turns his head and nods. That's all he gives me, it could be that he has food in his mouth or just being cold.

Zothani's hand tightens around me, we sit on the table.

"We are here," he says.

Nkatha picks a serviette and wipes his mouth. The helper appears and takes the

plate away, before she walks away she asks what we would like to drink.

“Juice is fine for both of us,” Zothani says.

I just smile, what else can I say when my speaker has spoken for me? I would’ve loved some Coke, his brother is having it and I’m salivating.

Finally Nkatha looks at me and asks,

“Would you like some?”

“No.” Inside I’m screaming yes.

The helper is back with our juice and some biscuits.

“You don’t want to have fruits instead?” – Zothani.

Before I answer she asks the helper to give us fruits and take biscuits back to the

kitchen. One of the reasons he's in my house more often is to dictate what I eat. This is my first pregnancy, I would like to enjoy it and give my body what it wants than sticking to healthy diets.

Nkatha looks like he wants to say something but he doesn't. The helper brings a bowl of fresh grapes and sliced apples. When do I get to eat hot wings and whatever the junk pregnant women indulge into? But I'm not going to be fussy in his brother's house, we will have this conversation in our space.

“Have you told her parents?” – Nkatha.

Zothani laughs, “You want me dead?”

“Don't act scared now, you weren't when you two made the baby.” His lips stretch

into what resembles a smile. This is the closest cheerful face of his that I've seen. When his eyes turn to me his face is back to how it always is- inhospitable.

“What do we do from here?” he asks.

I'm not sure what the answer to his question is, so I say the obvious.

“Paying for the damages as per usual,” I say.

He nods and looks at Zothani. His face kind of melts when he's talking to his brother.

He becomes lively- or close to it.

“Damages!” he says with emphasis.

Zothani chuckles, “Don't worry, I just need you to arrange the date. I will tell your father before the day ends.”

“You had it all planned out, huh?” He’s talking to me.

Zothani’s phone rings, he checks the caller and excuses himself from the table. I’m still trying to figure out what Nkatha means by saying I had it all figured out.

He picks up my confusion and elaborates, “I mean finding a desperate man to fall pregnant for.”

“We both wanted a baby but neither of us planned. We were both surprised.”

“Come on, I’ve lived long enough. What hurts me about you, young girls, is that you only look at the financial background whereas a lot of factors need to be considered before making a baby. You

didn't even look at our genetic history, as long as he affords."

In simpler terms he's saying I'm trapping his brother with a baby. I'm surprised because everyone close to Zothani knew he wanted a baby. Maybe he was desperate for it but I did not play on that. Heck, I can afford raising a child. I don't need millions to do it, I was raised by a R3k salary, me and my siblings.

"Maybe you should've become a pregnancy expert instead of a GP. Had you been one I would've consulted you on what to do before falling pregnant." It comes out disrespectful, my bad. But as I said, I wanted a baby but I didn't plan this pregnancy, it just happened. I didn't have

time to look into genetic history and all that shit. I don't even know Zothani's networth to trap him with a baby.

“Do you blame me for having questions? That's my little brother...”

I cut him short, “He's 36!”

“Right, too old for you.”

I grab the glass of Coke in front of him and gulp it down. So he thinks they're all that?

He's staring at me as I finish his Coke.

“You can tell him not to take care of the baby,” I'm angry.

“That's not how we are, he's obliged to take care of you and the baby now.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

Where's Zothani? I want to get out of this place.

His heavy glare is still on me, I'm calling Zothani's phone.

He's not answering, okay I need to stay calm.

"I would like to speak to your father about the damages, that was the purpose of the day," he says, very calm, like he didn't just push all my buttons.

I'm not the one to get angry like this easily. I don't let people get under my skin.

"You want his number?" I ask, raising my eyes to him.

"Yes, please," he says, he's still giving me that look.

I scroll down to my father's number, I have to call him first and tell him someone needs to speak to him. I didn't think I'd have to talk to him so soon after that viral video, I'm still angry and disappointed in him. His phone rings a couple of times before he answers.

"Is this urgent Salabenzi?" He's usually happy to receive my calls, but not today.

"Someone wants to speak to you baba," I say.

"Can't it wait?"

"Unfortunately no."

"Okay, she must make it quick."

So he assumes it's a female, he's in for a surprise!

I give Nkatha the phone and leave the table to look for Zothani. I don't want to hear how my father will react to the news, I'm grown but to him I'll always be a child.

Zothani is here in the kitchen stuffing his face with the biscuits he told me we were not eating. He's chatting his heart away with the helper.

When he lifts his face to me embarrassment engulfs his face.

“Baby you are done talking with Nkatha?”

I fold my arms and glare at him. He knows I love chocolate biscuits and dislike his brother, and this is what he does to me.

“This MaMgeyane, we call him MaMge,” he says.

I look at her, I can't even smile because these two men have pissed me off for the next 12 hours. "Hello Ma, I'm Salo Mhlongo."

"Nice to finally meet you, please have some biscuits, I know you've been dying for them, pity you fell pregnant for an old man," she says.

Zothani laughs, it diffuses the awkwardness.

I'm still mad at him, but I sit and share the plate of biscuits with him.

"Are you okay?" he asks me.

I give him a look, he was setting me up to get scolded by his brother.

MaMge is carrying on with her business. She looks like a warm woman, I wonder

how she manages to put up with Nkatha's coldness. I would've resigned on the first day.

Just as he crosses my mind, he appears with my phone.

His face tells no good news.

"Her father said no," he says.

I'm confused, why would my father say that?

"What?" You can tell Zothani is panicking. He did not expect things to go otherwise, he thought it would be smooth if he takes the Zulu route of doing things.

"Why?" I ask.

Nkatha shrugs and goes to the fridge.

My phone rings, it's my father.

I look at Zothani, I'm scared.

"Pick up," he says.

I take a deep breath and step out of the kitchen.

"Baba," I answer.

"Salabenzi what are you doing to me?"

I knew he'd be disappointed, but not this!

"I'm ready to be a mother baba," I say in almost whisper.

I've never been secretive about my future goals.

"I don't have time for this, there's so much going on in my life, I don't need more chaos."

His cheating scandals is what's going on.

“Your mother cannot know about this,” he says.

“But I’m already pregnant, the father wants to come and pay what’s due to you.”

“MaNkosi is calling me, I have to go.” With that said he drops the call.

What is happening?

There’s nothing I haven’t done to be a good daughter to him. This is one thing I badly wanted for myself. Why would my father deny me a happy pregnancy?

I’m calling my mom, she needs to talk to her cheating husband.

She answers; “Salabenzi this is not a good time.”

Okaaay, nobody wants to talk to me today.

“I need your help,” I say.

They say mothers get through fathers easily for their children.

“Talk,” she says.

Deep breath...

“First of all I’m pregnant, secondly the father of my baby wants to come and pay the damages but your husband refuses,” I say.

There’s something breaking on the floor. I hope she’s not hurt. I wait for her response and all I hear is her heavy breathing.

“Mama?”

“I’m still here, how far are you?” She sounds calmer than I expected.

“I’m going to 4 weeks,” I say.

“Okay, I need you to come home as soon as you can.”

“What about ubaba?” I ask.

“I will sort that out. Just come home and let me handle....” She’s disturbed by a piercing scream. I’m on the call hearing all the commotion. It’s MaNkosi crying.

“No, not Thembelihle nkosi yami!” – my mom.

Now I’m panicking, what did Aunt Teekay do?

“What’s going on Ma?” I ask.

“Thembelihle is gone,” she says.

Just after trending? I look at my phone, she’s terminated the call.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 12

NONDUMEZULU

It's quiet, Aunt Teekay's absence is loud. As much as I wanted her to leave I will miss her cooking and just her taking care of everything in the house. Today my routine resumes; coming home and cooking and washing Nzuzo's school uniform. Aunt Teekay has been doing all that for me, I would come home and just relax. I'm not complaining though, I will have space to

figure out the mystery in my life. I hope my visit to church with Nkalipho gives some answers.

My mother is in her room as usual. Nzuzo is watching cartoons, when he sees me walking in he jumps off the couch and comes to me with his arms open. He wraps his arms around me and hugs me for what feels like forever. This is not a usual behavior, he's not much of a hugger.

“Was school okay baby?”

He nods, I can see that he's not okay.

“Let me change my clothes, I will come back and watch cartoons with you, okay?”

He nods. Maybe I don't spend enough time with him, he misses me.

I start in my mother's room to greet before going to my room to change.

She's reading a newspaper, when she realizes that I'm at the door she starts crying.

Why is everyone acting strange?

I put my bag on the bed in panic.

"Ma, what's wrong?" I ask.

"Your aunt is no more," she says.

"Aunt Teekay?"

She nods, "Yes, she's gone."

Okaaaay. I need to sit.

"What happened?" I ask.

"She collapsed and died in the car with Mhlongo," she says.

“When did that happen?” My spirit is not picking to this. I know I had my issues with Aunt Teekay but she was still my aunt, she’s been since I was born. I did not hate her, I still held her in my heart, I should feel something upon hearing that she’s dead. But I don’t, this death doesn’t move my soul.

“About two hours ago, I was waiting for you to come back before I leave,” she says.

It doesn’t add up. Why was Aunt Teekay still with Babo in the car two hours ago? She left in the morning, before I even went to work.

“Where was she?” I ask.

“She was at Dark City, it’s not something a child should hear.”

“I’m not a child, what she doing there with Babo?”

“It doesn’t matter now, I need to go and prepare for the funeral.” She’s no longer crying.

I guess this is why Nzuzo is sad as well.

“I will call my manager and tell her that...”

“No, don’t worry, you stay here with Nzuzo. I will manage, I have cousins and aunts who will be there to help, should I need any help.”

“But I still need to come, she was my aunt, Nzuzo loved her,” I say.

She shakes her head, “You’re not coming, Nzuzo needs to go to school, we also need money so you have to work.”

**“When is the funeral going to take place?
We can come a day before.”**

**She exhales, “We still don’t know if she
really practiced witchcraft, so it will be
dangerous for you to bring my grandchild
to the funeral.”**

**My heart starts bleeding, but I nod, we
won’t go to the funeral. I’m starting to ask
myself questions. What if the sangoma lied?
What if I mistreated my aunt for nothing?
Before the witchcraft thing she was the best
aunt any niece could ask for. She deserves
to be accompanied by her whole family to
her eternal place. But what my mother is
saying makes sense and it looks like she’s
not down for an argument, her mind is
made up.**

I've helped her pack her bags. It's Babo who's taking her home, they're travelling by Shange's car. There's something off about this whole thing. How did she die? Who declared her dead? Why is Babo here, I assume him and Aunt Teekay had something going on behind walls.

My phone rings, it's Salo.

She must've heard the tragic news.

"Hey Salo," I answer.

"Hey Nondu, I heard what happened to Aunt Teekay. How are you? How's everybody?"

"I don't know how I am. Mom is leaving with Babo, I'm not going to attend the

funeral, so I don't know what's going to happen, I'm just clueless," I say.

"So she really had an affair with my father?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say with a low sigh.

"She was, the video explains everything."

"What video?" I ask.

"The viral video of her and my father running on the streets."

"I don't have data, so I don't know the video." This is embarrassing, so everyone knows except me. I know Babo is a good-looking man, but come on fam, his character is just flat. What attracted her to him?

“So what happened to her? Nobody is answering my calls,” – Salo.

“They say she collapsed and died,” I say.

“That’s sad, hey.”

“Yeah, and confusing. Who’s talking in your background?”

“Zothani,” she says.

“Who’s that?”

“Your niece or nephew’s father,” she says.

“What?” This girl needs to get the fuck out.

“Yes, finally Nzuzo will have someone to play with.”

I’m mourning, I cannot scream, but girl say what? I thought she said she’s not going to have a baby just yet, she was only planning on it.

“Is the father cute?” I ask.

“He’s tall, dark and handsome.”

I laugh, “Sound like a novel character. Is he happy to become a father?”

“He is, but sadly your father is not.”

“He’s just disappointed, he will come around. I’m happy for you, I hope you have a happy one, unlike me,” I say.

“Well, it doesn’t look promising for now, but fingers crossed.”

We chat for another minute before I end the call to attend to my mother who’s taking her bags to the car. She needs help.

Babo looks sad, but it’s not giving the trauma he must’ve gone through having a side-chick dying in his arms. Where’s Mam’

Busi in all this? If the video went viral, surely she's seen or heard about it. Why is she not angry? Her husband is still here, about to help with the funeral arrangements. Is he not remorseful about the situation?

I'm putting the bag inside the car, I feel his hand touching me.

I look at him, I don't see him in the same light, I don't think I will ever be able to look at him past the theory Nzuzo gave me and his cheating scandals.

"Don't worry, everything will be fine," he says, he looks so sure.

"How long are you going to be there?" I ask.

“I don’t know, I will be there if your mother needs me.”

I appreciate that, him coming through for us. But I still don’t think I’m getting it.

“Is Mam’ Busi okay with all of this?” I ask.

“Yeah, we are family,” he says.

Mmmm. I don’t know if I’d still consider a woman who cheated with my husband family, even after she died. Mam’ Busi has a big heart.

Speaking of her, she’s coming through the gate with a piercing cry.

Now it really feels like someone is dead.

My heart sinks at the realization that I will never see Aunt Teekay again.

“Oh nkosi yami usenzani?” She’s crying louder, it’s more piercing than that modest cry my mother did when I walked in. It makes everything feels real.

My mother is the one coming out with a glass of water to calm her down.

Nzuzo comes out and stands next to me.

Babo is standing with Shange by the car.

They’re silently watching the two women.

After some time everyone calms down, we all get inside the house.

Mam’ Busi looks broken than all of us, again I’ll say how big her heart is, I wouldn’t cry for my husband’s side-chick. Or she doesn’t know yet.

“Did she say anything to you Njomane before taking her last breath? Any goodbyes?” she asks Babo.

“No, nothing,” Babo says.

She turns her eyes to my mother, so much pity.

“Did she report any pain before leaving?”

My mother exhales, “Yes, she had a side pain but it wasn’t something severe.”

Mam’ Busi’s eyes widen, she quickly glances at Babo before turning her eyes back to my mother. That was...I don’t know, weird.

“It must’ve been that. Are you going to get an autopsy done?”

“No,” my mother says.

My eyes widen. “Is it not compulsory since this was an unnatural death?”

“No, it was a natural death,” she says.

I don’t know much about death and laws of South Africa when it comes to it, but I would’ve loved if the post-mortem examination was done. What if Babo killed her? Excuse my exaggeration but this is South Africa, men kill women everyday.

They’re leaving now, I empty my bag and give my mother R200 that I was going to use for electricity. I will make another plan, at least Aunt Teekay had a funeral insurance, we won’t be making debts and running to loan-sharks.

I'm left with Mam' Busi and Nzuzo. She's still in disbelief.

“That was quick...I mean Thembelihle was still young.”

“Would you like something to drink?” I ask.

She shakes her head, “I have to go.”

I nod, she walks out talking to herself. I think she's moved by this death more than everyone. This is proof that death is inescapable, you can be okay and drop dead without getting sick. I still need to wrap my head around this.

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BABO

He's back, feeling more burden on his shoulders. Salo has made things worse, there's already a lot on his plate and now he has to stretch himself for her protection as well. What he doesn't know is that she defied him and told her mother about it. When he walks in MaKhumalo is pacing up and down with her hands on the waist.

"We have another problem," she says before he even sits.

"We just took care of one, can we take a break?"

"A break Njomane? Your daughter is pregnant, you know very well that we cannot afford to have that. She already has men calling you and wanting to come here,

all they want is her to go and work for their family.”

“Or she’s found love,” Babo says.

Busisekile gives him a look- idiot!

“Have you forgotten the sacrifices we made for that child to just throw it all away for love?” She’s shaking with anger.

“I know, but can we focus on what’s happening right now?”

“Your childhood crush has been taken care of. She’s dead, is she not?”

“She is,” he says and looks away.

“Then we need to move on to the next problem. That bundle of misery in your daughter’s womb,” she says.

“We cannot kill our own granddaughter Mntungwa.”

“It’s not a human being yet, just a fetus,” she says.

Babo frowns, “That fetus is what’s going to form a human being. There’s life breathed into it by God.”

Busisekile cracks up. Is this her husband or a cheap version of TD Jake?

“You’re probably hungry,” she says heading to the stove.

She turns it on to warm up the stew.

“I’m proud of you by the way, this is what a man does to protect his family,” she says with a smile. With this one she hit two birds with one stone. Not that Thembelihle scared her, she knows that her husband

will never leave her for another woman, but it's still giving her relief that she's dead.

“Are you sure she didn't make any phone calls the time you were here to collect your bag?” she asks wiping his plate. It's a new one from a set that she bought for special occasions. This is her hard-working husband, he deserves to be treated like a king.

“No, she didn't, I checked her phone,” he says.

She cracks a loud laugh. “Shame, she really thought you were coming back to help her get rid of me. Who's in the freezer like a chicken now?”

Babo smiles...

Yeah, first mission accomplished.

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NONDUMEZULU

He's here, I don't know how he drove so fast, it hasn't been ten minutes since I called him and just cried on the phone. I go to the gate and open it, as usual Nzuzo is on my tail. He rolls down the window and asks that we come closer.

I signal for him to drive in. He doesn't, instead he gets out of the car and comes by foot. He stands on the other side and looks at me.

He's wearing the green working uniform,
but still looking fresh as always.

"I can't come in," he says, his eyes are still
searching in mine.

"It's just me and Nzuzo, come," I say.

He looks around, he's still hesitant.

"Aunt Teekay is dead, Gogo is gone to bury
the corpse," – Nzuzo.

Wow, that was a good summary.

"Is that true?" He looks at me with
sympathy.

I nod, tears are burning my eyes again.

I'm not crying because my aunt is dead, I
haven't found that in my soul, I'm not even
mourning in my heart. I still need my
questions answered, maybe then I'll make

peace with the fact that she's dead. For now I just want to know what killed her and who declared her dead, from there what happened. Somebody needs to paint a picture for me, I was family as well.

I don't know when he took the step and crossed over, his arms are around me, I'm feeling his cold lips on my cheek. The hug gets tighter, I'm pressed on his chest for a minute, then he lets go. His thumb reaches to the corners of my eyes and wipes the tears threatening to roll out. I look at him, our eyes lock, there's that gut-gripping feeling again, my heart slips a beat. I release a deep breath and look down at my son.

He giggles, he's looking at both of us.

Damn, am I really doing this in front of my son?

Before guilt trips me, Nkalipho lifts him up and carries him on his hip.

We are going inside, he's done being a chicken.

Well, there's nothing glamorous about my home but at least Nzuzo didn't mess it up as he always does. I'm not ashamed to lead Nkalipho to our small lounge and offer him a glass of cold Oros.

I sit and welcome the question I badly want answers to as well.

“What happened to her?” – Nkalipho.

“I hear she collapsed and died,” I say.

“Was she sick?” he asks.

“My mother says she was, I didn’t see it, she didn’t show it in the morning. What makes this whole thing a mess is that she died with Babo, she was having an affair with him, I guess. Then all of a sudden him and my mother are two captains working together to solve the funeral case. I mean, am I the only one who has questions?”

He slowly nods, at least he’s listening to what I’m saying.

“Do you think maybe he killed her?” he asks.

“Should I put it past him? Apparently there’s a video of him running with her on the streets in Dark City, maybe he got scared that people knew and decided to kill

her before Mam' Busi found out." Well, it doesn't make sense now that I'm saying it to someone. Babo doesn't have a motive, he really doesn't. I can say it was Mam' Busi, but I'd be stretching it, she wasn't even there and by the look of things she hasn't even seen the video yet.

"Can I see the video?" he asks.

"No, I don't have data, I'll ask Salo to send it to me once I'm sorted."

"Oh, okay," he says.

A moment of uninvited silence passes. I raise my eyes to find him staring at me, he looks away when he's caught. Nzuzo comes from wherever he's been and climbs on his lap.

"Thanks for coming and listening," I say.

He looks at me, our eyes lock. I'm loving his soft and shy character. Men around here tend to be bullies who think women are toys to be controlled.

"It's not safe here, you have to pack your bag and Nzuzo's," he says.

What did I say about men around here again? He's part of them.

"You mean my father's house is not safe?"
Imihlola le.

"The situation is not safe," he says and puts Nzuzo down. He pats his shoulders and says, "Boy, go and pack your school uniform and clothes."

Nzuzo doesn't confirm with me, he just runs to his room. This is why I spank his

little ass with my sandals, because what kind of a child is this.

“Really? I thought we talked about you respecting me as a mother,” I’m pissed.

“Come on Nondu, this is not a time for us to fight. I will take him to school and you to work, until your mother comes back. What if your aunt was killed?”

Yeah, he has a point, but still, I want things to be discussed with me.

“Nkalipho, you can’t just...” Deep breath, it’s okay Nondu! Why do I always have to argue with this man? He’s right, I just feel like I’m being rescued and it’s denting my little ego.

He's looking at me, eyebrows raised. When I look at him back he looks away. Why can't I read his mind, damn.

"Why don't you like it when I look at you in the eyes?" I ask.

"It's not that I don't like it, I have strabismus," he says.

"Really?" I'm shocked.

"So you didn't notice?" I'm not sure if he's hurt by that. I have noticed most things about him, I just didn't pay attention to his eyes, and how the hell did he expect me to know when he's ran his eyes away almost everytime I looked at them.

"Is it a nerve injury or you were born that way?" I ask.

“Nerve injury, I was hit by my mom when I was three, it’s mainly just my right eye.”

My heart sinks. I’m looking at him, this time he doesn’t look away or try to squint his eyes so that I don’t notice. In a minute his right eye loses control and doesn’t align with the direction of where his left eye is looking. It’s not that bad mos, he still looks good. What makes it bad is how it got like this. I’m now scared to ask about his mother. I would hate my mother if she did that to me, which brings me to my own relationship with Nzuzo. What if I hurt him one day?

“You’re still handsome,” I tell Nkalipho.

“Still?” He’s smiling.

“I never said you were ugly,” I say
defensively.

He laughs, “Oh okay, you need to go and
pack your bag.”

I stand and stretch my arms. I’m tired as
hell. I will pack and go with him, Nzuzo is
already packing his bag, he’d hate me if I
told him we are not going anywhere. But
I’m still taking another risk here, this man
has made it clear that he wants something
out of this friendship or whatever it is, and
now I’m going to his house, he will have
my ears whenever he needs to.

I turn my head and look at him. Found him
staring as usual.

He smiles, doesn’t look away this time. I
like that he’s now comfortable.

“You’re not going to get me that easily you know,” I say.

He gives me a lopsided smile, “I never said I wanted to get you easily. A wounded deer leaps the highest, but a hungry hunter chases until the sun sets down.”

“I’m not a wounded deer Nkalipho.” I mean, what the fuck!

“Oh okay, please go and pack,” he says.

I hate that ‘oh okay’, he mustn’t say that to me, it’s fake realization to mock people.

He raises his eyebrow at my mean glare.

“What did I do now?”

“Sometimes I forget that salt looks like sugar, you’re fake.”

“Oh okay,” he says.

“Don’t say that to me!”

“What did I say?”

I give him the middle finger and walk away. He’s laughing behind me, he’s just wearing a sheep skin, fake angel.

Now, ugly panties and ex-white bras aside!

Which clothes am I packing? I don’t want to go there and look the poorest in the neighborhood. Let me not pack too much, I’ll be at work during the day, I don’t need a whole wardrobe. I take only the new-looking ones and leave the ones Aunt Teekay got me from her Indian friends.

When I walk out Nzuzo is ready with his backpack and little bag, they’re now waiting for me. He went far as changing from what he was wearing to...God forbid.

What is this child wearing? That ripped jersey out of all things I've bought for him in his life. I don't know if the arms were chewed by rats, there's a big hole on the stomach. Seriously? This is first-hand embarrassment.

"Go and change that jersey," I tell him.

Nkalipho brushes his head, "There's no need, just confirm if he packed everything necessary, we are going straight to my house anyway."

He's doing it again, I thought we talked about this.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 13

NONDUMEZULU

I take Nzuzo off that hideous jersey first thing when we arrive. Nkalipho shows me around, it's not that late but I can give Nzuzo a bath now since he will be playing indoors. He's happy to be here, for him this is just a vacation to Lume's house. I help him take a bath and put him in his pyjamas. I don't know when Nkalipho fixed him noodles, but mostly why does a black man living alone has noodles in his kitchen. Who eats them?

“Did you know we were coming?” I ask.

He frowns, “No, if I did I would’ve cooked.”

“So you just buy noodles for yourself?” I’m judging him.

“Masentle buys my grocery, I think she just brings that here for Sphiwe because sometimes he sleeps over,” he says.

“You and Masentle are close?” I’m curious to know about his childhood. I feel like I already have a glimpse of it through his eye condition. But I know some subjects can be sensitive, I want him to give me his background bit by bit, on his own accord.

“You’ll be close to her as well, she’s a good woman,” he says.

He’s talking as if I’m going to be here for the rest of my life. This is temporary, I’m

leaving as soon as my mother tells me she's coming back. He excuses himself and goes to the bathroom to freshen up.

I guess this is when as a visitor one becomes useful. He's said that he didn't get time to cook, he came from the site straight to my house obviously he's hungry. I open the fridge; there are trays of red meat, sausages, frozen chicken and for the black life in him some from a cow stomach. I will make chicken, there's frozen veges and all the usual ingredients I'll need to make a desperate 'see-me' stew. I don't know what I'm cooking it with, hopefully there's rice.

Nzuzo leaves his bowl on the carpet after eating. I cannot shout at him here, I quietly take it to the kitchen and wash it. There's a

dishwasher but I believe in using sponge and Sunlight bar, germs cannot escape these hands.

Foosteps come and stop at the passage. I turn my head and find him staring at me. I love that he no longer looks away when I catch him staring, he holds the stare boldly before walking in.

“I already talked to Masentle, I was going to get food from home,” he says.

“It’s fine, I have already started. Do you have rice?” I ask.

“No, I will go and ask Masentle for it,” he says.

I think he’s a stepmommy-boy, if there’s such. Why would he bring a guest over and

then have his stepmother taking care of the food? Masentle is also a strange mother, I mean Nzuzo wouldn't bring a female friend to his house and then ask me to provide food. The Mhlongos would rise and stand on their feet, the hell!

“We can just eat bread,” I say.

“Is Nzuzo going to be okay with that? I'm sure his grandmother cooks him full meal, we don't want him to be sad, right?”

“He's not a spoilt-brat, he will eat whatever he's being given.”

Instead of listening to me he yells for Nzuzo to come over. Funnily every time we have fought it's been about Nzuzo, you'd swear we are terrible co-parents.

Nzuzo comes in running, he stands in front of us with his curious face turned up.

“What do you want for dinner?” –
Nkalipho.

“I want meat,” he says.

“What do you want to eat with meat?”

“I want two big meat,” Nzuzo says.

What an embarrassing child, he’s how acting like he doesn’t eat meat at home.

“Okay you will get your two big meat. Do you want it with rice or bread?”

“Rice,” he says.

Devil’s little agent!

Nkalipho turns to me, “I will be back now.”

As soon as he walks out I turn to Nzuzo with my eyes widen.

“You have to behave and have manners,” I tell him.

“What did I do mommy?” He’s so innocent and clueless.

Fuck me for projecting my crazy nonexistent standards on him. He’s a child, he deserves to be free and to be allowed to say what’s on his mind. Guilt is slicing me apart, I bring his little hands to my lips and kiss them.

“Be yourself baby, okay? Don’t mind mommy, she’s stressed.”

His eyelashes flap rapidly. “Is it because Aunt Teekay is dead?”

I nod, “Yes, but everything is going to be okay.”

I take a packet of salted peanuts from the cupboard and give him.

“Go and watch Power Rangers,” I say.

He smiles and runs off.

I was getting impatient waiting for the rice, finally Nkalipho is back. He’s carrying a big silver bowl, so he went and got cooked rice.

I wonder what his parents think of me.

“Really? I was going to cook rice,” I say.

He puts the bowl on the counter and washes his hands in the sink. He’s not going to pay attention to my displeasure?

“Do you always do this? Bother Masentle?”

I ask.

“Yeah, that’s why I didn’t move far from home,” he’s not even joking.

“So you always do this? Bringing women here and getting your stepmother to feed them?”

His eyebrows snap, then he looks at me, the frown disperses, he’s smiling.

“No, you’re a third woman to come here,” he says.

Not the first, oopsie!

“But we are not dating, you remember that, right?”

That lopsided smile again. I love his face when he’s about to mock me.

“How can I? You remind me every chance you get.”

My eyes widen, “Do I?”

“You always disagree with everything I say, especially when it concerns Nzuzo, just to prove my insignificance in your life,” he says.

Wow, that was mouthful, I certainly didn’t expect it.

“Should I dish up?” he asks.

“No, I’ll be fine, go and watch Power Rangers.”

He leaves, I’m left with his words ringing in my head. Our arguments have been about Nzuzo, all of them. I’m used to being the only parent, I say what goes with my child and what doesn’t. This friendship or whatever this is comes with new dynamics, I’m yet to get used to them.

We eat in front of the TV, Nzuzo is in charge of the remote so we are watching cartoons. I'm not a great cook but today I made an effort, it tastes great. Nkalipho wipes his plate clean, give me my chef accolades already. Nzuzo only ate half, he started with noodles. I take plates to the kitchen and put Nzuzo's left-overs in the fridge and handwash the dishes.

I hear a deep breath behind me,
"There's a dishwasher," he says.

"I trust my hands more," I say.

He pulls a chair and sits. Now I feel like a maid being watched over by a boss.

I rinse the plates and leave them to dry.

**“Now I have to take a bath and go to bed,”
I say to myself. I’m the only one who hasn’t
freshened up. When I come back I will help
Nzuzo with his school work.**

**“You can use my bathroom,” he says as I
walk away.**

**“It’s fine, I will use the one Nzuzo used.”
He was right about me disagreeing with
him for no specific reason, I’m doing it right
now, I just want to not do what he wants
me to do.**

**When I come out of the bathroom wearing
my long pyjamas- not selling myself cheap,
Nzuzo has fallen asleep on his lap. Lifting
him up when he’s asleep is a job and half,
he’s heavy. His books are scattered on the**

coffee-table, so they did his schoolwork already. How long was I in the shower?

“He needs to go to bed. Where is he going to sleep?”

“Sphiwe’s room, if he’s okay sleeping alone.”

“Yeah, he loves having his own space. Can you take him there? I can’t carry him.”

I pack his schoolbag and follow them. He safely tucks Nzuzo in bed, I kiss little forehead and leave his school bag on top of the bookshelf. He sleeps with lights on, we quietly walk out.

“So where am I going to sleep?”

“In the room next to his, just in case he wakes up at night. Are you going to bed so early?”

“I’m working tomorrow Nkalipho,” I say.

He looks disappointed, I’m really tired, I want to be in bed.

He stands in front of me, with his one hand tucked in the pocket and one wrapped around his neck. I’m also standing, waiting to hear whatever he wants me not to go to bed for.

“I feel like you don’t ever think about anything I tell you,” he says.

I fold my arms and yawn. “Like what? Give me an example.”

“You don’t know?” he asks.

I shrug, “I don’t. Why don’t you remind me?”

“I asked that you give me a chance, I really like you, right now there’s nothing I want more than you and I,” he says.

I wanted him to say it and he said it so beautifully, with his heart hanging in his words. I lift my eyes to look at him, he drops his stare. I thought we’ve worked on that.

“Beauty is found in imperfections, I don’t want you to look away from me,” I say.

He looks at me, there’s a pull that wants me to throw my arms around him and give him a rub-crushing hug, but I’m Nondumezulu hey.

“By the way I’m thinking about it,” I say.

“It doesn’t show Nondu,” he says.

Our eyes are locked, I'm giving less than what I'm feeling. My excuse is, he's a handsome gentleman and I've been single for a century; this is just biology, not real feelings, and I'm not going to play on to that.

“What do you want me to do? Send you a please-call-me everytime it crosses my mind?”

“Just show me you care, anyway you can. There's something in you that I'm too scared to lose because I know I won't find it in anyone else,” he says.

“Okay Nkalipho, I will show that I care. Can I go to bed now?”

He nods, “You can go.”

I take a few steps away and stop and look back.

He's still standing with his hand in the pocket and one around his neck.

I stop where I am and look at him.

He steps forward, I remain standing until he's an inch away from me.

He leans over, kisses my cheek and looks at me. This is the closest I've ever looked into his eyes, I'm scared of what my heart is doing to me.

"Have a good night Nondumezulu," he says in a sweet whisper.

"You too," I'm still hypnotized.

"I'll be laying awake like I always do." He turns and walks away.

Does he suffer from insomnia? I can advise him on that.

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SALO MHLONGO

Zothani is here, he came unannounced and he's sleeping over. We might as well just split the rent. I haven't said anything to him about his brother accusing me of trapping him with a baby. A lot happened after that, my father's refusal of the damages payment bothers me more than Nkatha's doubts. It bothers him too, we thought we had this thing figured out.

I come back from the bathroom, I'm there 100 times a day. He's wrapped under blankets with his eyes closed. Really, I was gone for just a minute.

I poke his cheek twice, his eyes open.

He smiles, "Uyahlupha yazi."

"You can't sleep while I'm wide awake, I'm carrying your baby."

He releases a deep sigh and pulls me closer.

We sleep naked even when the weather is terrible. I laid two blankets over us. He pulls my leg over his hip and wraps his one arm around me.

"Sebevukile oManzini," he says.

I only woke him up, not his black organ down there.

He smiles at my discomfort and rubs his nose against mine.

“You’re beautiful,” he says.

“And young, so your brother thinks.”

“I know, he’s been saying it. We know what we want, right?”

I nod, “Yeah, we do.”

“Please don’t let me down, I’m done fucking around, I want something straight forward, and that’s you and our munchkin,” he says.

“I never started fucking around,” I say.

He chuckles and gently nibbles on my lower lip.

“And that’s why I can’t get enough of you.”

He grabs my butt, squeezes his grip and

kisses me deeper. We had incredible connection from day one, he knows how to work a woman's body, he gets me ready and gets me done for.

“You have amazing boobs,” he says before sucking both my nipples. His hand drops down and massages between my legs, I'm wet- because of hormones of course. “So this is why you woke me up? This is man abuse yazi.”

Man abuse yet his shaft is hard like a rock.

“You can say no, I know that no means no.”

He looks up, his eyes squinted with lust. He licks his lower lip and smiles.

“I hope you wiped the pee,” he turns over and removes the blanket.

He can be stupidly blunt like that. I want to slap his stupid head but he's already tucked between my legs, his tongue is running gently on my kiwi.

I'm panting, pulling my nipples and calling his name. He's good with his tongue, I'm now ready to just splash over his face. He lies on his side and pulls me to lie on mine facing him. Then he slides his shaft in, inch by inch, until he's fully inserted in.

"Lift your leg up a bit more," he instructs.

I do as told and feel his shaft hitting deep in my stomach.

"Yeah, that way babygirl!" He closes his eyes, his mouth remains open. Then he pounds in and out, with so much force. I love it fast, he knows.

“Yes, like that sthandwa sami!” I’m losing my head.

My toes are trembling, I’m close already.

He keeps a steady pace and opens his eyes to watch me fall apart, he likes witnessing that for his manhood satisfaction. “Does it feel good babygirl?”

“Yeah, it feels good,” I say.

“Why are you whispering? Say it loud, tell me what you feel.” His thumb is on my pleasure-button, heating it up. He knows I’ll give in to whatever he’s saying.

“It feels good Zothani,” I scream.

“What feels good?” He yanks my legs, turns me over and enters me from the back.

I'm lying flat on my stomach, with my legs spread out, powerlessly.

He's pounding me, the sheets under me are wet, my pleasure-button just had a mini stroke, a good one. I'm mumbling things I can't make sense of.

Then I hear a loud bang, it's so far away though.

I keep mumbling his name, telling him how much I love him.

Then I feel cold on my back, there's commotion here, inside my bedroom.

I snap out and turn in my nakedness. My soul leaves my body when I realize who's in the room. When? How?

He's standing with Zothani in his grip. I don't recognize what he is, his eyes are bloodshot, he's livid.

“Baba!”

He lets go of Zothani and comes to me.

He lifts me up from the bed, gosh my cookie is leaking, he gives no shit about that.

“What did I say to you?” he roars.

Zothani pulls the blanket and covers himself instead of running away.

“Baba how did you get in here?” I'm still in his grip.

“I'm here because you don't listen!”

“Babana!” I’m not sure why he’s so mad at me that he doesn’t even mind invading my privacy like this.

His eyes soften, he lets go of me and looks at Zothani. Now I can recognize him.

“Get dressed and come to the lounge immediately, I don’t have the whole day,” he says to me and gives Zothani another cold look and walks out.

Is my heart still in my chest? My father just walked into me having sex , paid no regard to it and just continued being mad at me for whatever reason.

“What do I do?” Zothani asks, you can tell he just had an out-of-body experience.

“Sit here, I will find out what’s going on.”

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 14

SALO MHLONGO

If the floor can open up I'd jump right in and disappear. The fluffy gown and body spray I've put on cannot erase what my father saw. I'm an adult, it's not a sin to make sex, but this will go down as my most embarrassing moment in history. I make my slow walk of shame and join him in my small lounge. He's not looking at me, he

seems to be engrossed in his own deep thoughts.

“Baba,” I say taking a seat.

He doesn’t acknowledge me. Maybe he needs a moment, he’s still angry.

I let a moment pass, he doesn’t acknowledge my presence, now I’m starting to think he hasn’t even realized that I’m here.

“Babana,” I say.

Out of the three of us I’m the one who’s closer to him. I’m 9 years older than my sister Sbonga and 11 years older than the little brat that is my brother, Sekhona. I was the only child for many years, I bonded better with parents, especially my father, I’m his princess, I know his soft spots.

He looks at me, displeasure fills his eyes. I think images of what he saw in the bedroom just came back rushing; he's shaking his head in disappointment.

"I'm sorry Njomane," I say in shame.

"So you're cohabiting?"

Really now?

"No, he's visiting," I say.

"What's the difference? You're doing things that only married people are allowed to do." He's angry but this is now my father.

He sounds and looks like this when he's angry, not that animal that budged into my room earlier.

"You said it's urgent. Is everyone alright?" I ask.

“Everyone is alright,” he clears his throat and sits up straight. “Why did you call your mother after I made it clear that I don’t need her to know?”

“You refused to let Zothani come and pay the damages, which is important for the baby, I didn’t know what else to do except calling mom,” I say.

He shakes his head and takes a deep breath. His finger is restlessly tapping on his knee. A moment of silence passes, I’m still not clear on why he’s here.

“I don’t know how to protect you, my princess. I have failed you as a father and now I feel like it’s a bit too late,” he says, he looks thoughtful, like he’s speaking from his head.

“Protect me from what?” I’m confused. I’m a princess, yes, but I don’t need my father’s protection, I have stood on my own for years.

“From devils of this world,” he says.

Okay, I’m lost.

He turns and fixes his gaze on me. He’s empty, maybe it’s Aunt Teekay’s death, there’s no burning hope in my father’s eyes. My heart breaks, she may have been a side-chick but they had their illegal memories together, he’s hurting.

“Can you listen to me and do what I say?” he asks.

I nod, I’m not sure if I will comply to whatever request he wants to make, but I need to put him at ease.

“Don’t come home until you give birth. We will sort any other thing, damages included, after the baby is born,” he says.

Well, that’s delusional.

“Why? I can’t be away from home for 6 months, that’s a long time.”

“It’s for your own safety,” he says.

He’s already stressed out, life is dealing with him, arguing with him right now would be draining out the last strength he has. So I agree, even though I know very well that I will be going home soon. That’s where my heart is

“How did you get here?” I ask.

“I’m with Shange, we are headed to Esikhawini.”

Oh, about that... I have questions.

“Why is Nondu not coming to the funeral?”

I ask.

“I don’t know the Nkosi family matters, I’m just going there to support since

MaNkosi’s cousins haven’t arrived,” he says.

“What about mom?” My tone is very harsh.

He looks at me, eyebrows raised.

“What about her?” He’s acting clueless.

I know he cheated, I’m just hurt that he’s being so public about supporting the funeral of his side-chick. That’s how I refer to the memory of Aunt Teekay, just my father’s side-chick.

“Is she okay?” I ask.

Well, I was going to ask who's taking care of her if he's going to run the errands of his side-chick's family, but respect comes first.

“Your mom is okay, I just need you to stop stressing her out, especially by sharing personal aspects of your life. If there's anything that you want to talk about or need call me instead, if I fail then we can tell her,” he says.

“Owkay,” I say trying to read his face. I hope they're not heading to divorce and starting to fight their battles with me. I love both of them to death, equally.

“That's an old boy,” he says.

I'm confused. “Which boy?”

He turns his eyes to the passage, then back to me.

Zothani, that's the boy he's talking about.

"Yes, a little bit," I say.

"Not a little bit, he's older than you. And he's dark."

As embarrassed as I've been, this makes me crack up and laugh.

"You don't like a dark son-in-law?" I ask.

"No, I don't," he says, he looks very serious, which makes this even funnier.

His preference got nothing to do with me. I love my dark, old 'boy.'

"He's sorry," I say.

"For what?" His sharp gaze makes me swallow hard.

I look away, he knows what I'm talking about.

He stands up, “Shange is waiting, I have to go.”

“You don’t want to sit and have a cup of tea?”

He looks at me, wrapped in my gown, smelling like a whole bottle of perfume to hide the shame. He’s not going to drink my tea, his pride as a father won’t allow him.

“Maybe next time, thanks for passing by,” I say.

“I wasn’t just passing by, remember what I said and take care of that little human being you’re carrying,” he walks towards the door and stops. “You’re still a child Salabenzi, act like one.”

He walks out.

I don't know what he meant by that. Maybe that I shouldn't go to the bedroom and do another round?

Hhayi-bo, I left a person here, where is he?

He's supposed to be in bed waiting for me.

"Zothani," I yell.

He answers by loudly clearing his throat, he's lying on the floor, wtf.

"Don't tell me you are hiding," I say.

"Is he still here?" He's mouthing the words.

I crack up and laugh. "He's gone, get up."

I can't believe this whole man was lying on the floor this whole time.

He slides in the blanket, he's shivering.

“I’m sorry about that, they must’ve let him in because they know he’s my father. He didn’t talk about it though, he was here for something else.”

“Is everything okay at home?” he asks.

I lie on his chest and release a deep sigh.

“I wish I was certain about that, but yeah, everything is said to be okay.”

“What did he say kanti?”

“He doesn’t want me to go home. I think maybe him and mom are not on good terms, so he’s trying to protect me from it.”

“You should give them space if they want it. You have a lot of places you can visit if you’re tired of being here, like my house tomorrow.”

I give him a look, he knows that I hate Salt Rock, for no solid reason.

“I have a new wall-mounted fireplace,” he says.

“I don’t care, if there’s a tsunami we will die in our sleep.” I don’t know why people never think of that before buying houses next to the beach. I don’t like taking risks with my life, not when I can help it.

“If there are floods we will also die here. But I will bring you back in the evening, I just want to have a few people over and celebrate,” he says.

Last minute invite!

“What are you celebrating?” I ask.

“Every good thing that has happened in my life this year, including a positive

pregnancy test from the woman I love,” he says.

So he’s throwing himself a party before I even get a baby shower?

“I will be there, should I bring a gift?”

He laughs, “You already have my gift. Are you going to sleep with that on?”

“The sleeping gown? Of course no, what if you want to fuck at night? It will be so inconvenient,” I mock as I untie the gown.

“Now you’re cocky because you already spurted.”

I thought he’d stay away from my vagina for at least a week after that awkward moment. But here we are, he’s sulking over the orgasm he never got.

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NONDUMEZULU

I keep hearing footsteps outside my door. I haven't been able to sleep peacefully the last two days, that's how I usually get when I'm in an unfamiliar environment. It fucks up my sleeping routines. My stay here has been awesome, Nkalipho fetches me from work and I find Nzuzo already here and food cooked. I don't know his working schedule, but he's always there whenever I need him. My mom said they'll be burying on Sunday, which automatically canceled my plans of visiting Nkalipho's church.

Even though I'm far away, I still want to mourn on Sunday and be indoors. We have postponed it to next week.

It's a few minutes away from 10pm, Nzuzo finally fell asleep after blocking our ears with his singing. I must say he's been very happy ever since we got here. I think because this house has almost everything a boy child would want, and I cannot shout at him here, Nkalipho makes a big deal out of it. He's been behaving that one, Nkalipho. I thought our stay here would be awkward but he's making things easy. We only spoke about his feelings the first night I was here, after that he's been only a friend and Lume to Nzuzo.

I'm lying awake in the bedroom, patiently waiting for my body to give in to exhaustion. I keep hearing footsteps, now I'm even thinking maybe Nzuzo woke up and decided to go and be naughty in the kitchen.

I get out of bed and put my robe on and drag my sleepers to the door. It's Nkalipho, he's drinking alcohol on the couch at this time.

I walk towards him and ask, "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, I'm just cold."

The cold beer explains it...he's very cold hey.

"Maybe you should go to bed," I suggest.

He turns and looks at me. I think we are finally comfortable with each other as human beings. I know about his strabismus and I have seen that he has a scar below his navel like he had a C-section. I haven't asked him about it but I've seen it because he's been topless in front of me.

“Can I come to your bed?”

Is it the beer talking?

“Why?” I ask.

“I just want to cuddle, I'm cold.”

Back to reality; he's asking me out and I've brought myself into his space. Men have different layers to them, they differ in colours, but beneath those layers they share one similarity- that they're men.

“You can come.” I don’t know what pushed that thought out of my mouth. Maybe my body, I’m also cold.

He finishes the beer and then follows me.

Heart beat is still steady, thank God.

I lie on the far end, we are both under one cover. I don’t know how much he drank but he doesn’t look drunk to me, he’s still the Nkalipho I know.

He smiles, “You’re far, sondela.”

“No sex, I’m not that type,” I say.

“Okay, come closer, I just want to hold you.”

I shift closer, he pulls me to his chest and covers me with his arms. I’m in his arms,

feeling warm already. I keep my head on his chest, face dropped, I don't want to look at him.

When he takes a deep breath I know he's about to say something.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he says.

"I know, your cuddle is the best."

"Not that, I'm saying I won't break your heart, just give me a chance."

"I haven't made my decision, I'm still thinking about it."

A deep sigh.

I feel his arms embracing me tighter, thanks to his vest that I'm not rubbing against his skin. I'm ignoring his boner, he will be strong.

“Can I ask something else then? It won’t interfere with your ‘thinking’.”

I lift my eyes to him, “What do you want to ask?”

He smiles and looks away for a second. Now his eyes show that he’s been indulging into some alcohol.

“Just a kiss,” he says.

“No,” I say.

“Please, I will go to my bed if you give me a kiss.”

“And if I don’t?” I raise my eyebrow.

“I will beg you all night,” he says.

That sounds more exhausting, I’d rather give him a light peck.

I plant it on his lips.

He chuckles, “A proper kiss Nondu.”

“You didn’t state that condition when I…”

My lip is locked between his, he’s hastily smooching me, his hand balances the back of my neck. It’s good, so I kiss him back.

He’s now deepening the kiss and wanting more.

I push him off, I’m out of breath.

“Nonduuu!” He moves from my lips to my neck. His tongue is all over my flesh, his hands on my waist, touching and squeezing. He’s breathing heavily, like he’s running a marathon. I take it for a while, moaning and grabbing his head. My body is weak, it cannot resist the pleasure. But focus crawls back in after a moment, I call his name and push him away.

“Please Nondu, kancane,” he’s begging and trying to pull me back.

“No, you only asked for a cuddle,” I say.

“Okay, can I cuddle my guy in, just for one minute. Please Nondu, I will do anything you want in return,” he sounds so desperate.

“No Nkalipho, go to your bed.”

Is he about to cry right now?

“I miss you,” he’s still begging.

How can he miss me when he’s never had me?

“You miss me?” I ask.

“I don’t know what to say to make you see how much I need you right now. Even if I

just put it in the lips, ngiyacela.” His chest is bouncing up and down.

I keep shifting back, I’m almost in the edge of the bed now.

“Nkalipho, I said no,” I say a bit more firm.

“You don’t even want to touch me?”

“No,” I say.

He inhales sharply and turns to his side, then he rolls out of bed. I hear a low ‘ishhh’ when he stands. He pulls his pants a bit lower and walks out funnily.

Why did I agree to the cuddle again?

Did I want him to come so that I can reject him?

Maybe I wanted that unconsciously, just to prove whatever it is that I want to prove to

myself. I hope things won't be awkward in the morning.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 15

NONDUMEZULU

I knew things would be awkward in the morning. When I woke up Nzuzo was ready for school, if there's one thing he excels in it's helping me with Nzuzo. I appreciate him for that, when I went to say thank you he was in the kitchen, he didn't look at me,

he hurriedly walked out before I said anything. I knew he was either angry that I rejected him or feeling embarrassed by the whole thing.

So in the car I sat at the back with Nzuzo, usually we both go and drop Nzuzo at school first. But today I asked him to drop me off first since the mall is before Nzuzo's school. My day went from bad to worse, I had more than two customers shouting at me about the prices, store products and "my lack of interest" in my job. Then multiple scoldings from Portia who acts like an IT specialist whenever I make a mistake.

I didn't want to call Nkalipho to come and pick me up when I left work. I merged taxis and got here safe. I have the whole house to myself, I'm touring each room and looking at everything I missed when he showed me around. It's just him, Sphiwe, Masentle and his father. Doesn't he have other relatives? His mother's pictures, where are they?

Maybe in his room. Should I go there? I respect people's privacy, I'm sure he has things he wouldn't want another person to invade. But curiosity gets better of me, I walk back to his bedroom and push the door open. His bed is neatly-made, I applaud him for the spotless white walls, Nzuzo would never allow me to have a room like this. He loves his own face

bandla; he has a picture of himself hanging on the wall above the bed, he was graduating, looking so happy with that sexy smile. He didn't control his eye here but he still looks cute with that crossed stare. I can't believe I'm staring at his picture like this.

I move on before the temptation to reach to the picture gets better of me.

He has a bookshelf, but no books. How disappointing! I'm no avid reader but I have a few copies in my room to show that I'm educated. Okay, there's a photo album in the drawer here. Maybe his mother's picture is here, and other relatives as well.

There's a folded document slid in between. I open, it's a discharge letter that looks old as my birth certificate. It shows that he was discharged from Chief Albert Luthuli hospital, maybe it's connected to the scar he has on his stomach.

I put it aside and page the album to see the pictures.

Horrible pictures!

It's not what one would expect from a photo album. His father is unrecognizable in these pictures, they were taken when he was still poor. Maybe they kept these to remember where they came from. Next pictures are horrible pictures of Nkalipho as a child. He looked sick in most of them. On this one he was definitely in the hospital,

the sheets shows it. He was topless, the scar looked fresh here, like he was just coming out of the surgery. My heart cannot take this, I close the album, surprisingly his mother's picture is not here either. I slide the letter back in and put the album back inside the drawer.

I notice an old torn newspaper in the corner and take it. It's dated back in 2002, November 6. It's an article covering a brutal murder of Gcinile Hlophe. I'm not interested in death news but this one piques my interest because, why is Nkalipho keeping the article here?

I sit on his bed and read; the woman was found lying in a pool of blood in her room

at Doornkop. She was with her son when she died, Nkalipho Mnguni, 10.

Fuck, it's his mother. I don't know why my hands start shaking as I read through, so her son was the "witness" to what happened. Mnguni was the first suspect but it was soon dismissed because evidence showed that he was in Durban on the day the mother of his son, then ex-girlfriend, died. Nkalipho was admitted to the children's mental care centre after the incident.

I leave the newspaper where I found it. I walk out leaving everything in place, my heart is racing, I don't know anything about these people yet I'm here. I find myself in the kitchen gulping down a glass of water. I

need to Google this case, I'm sure the internet remembers something.

Who Killed Gcinile Hlophe?

Not Mnguni, obviously.

A 10 year old Nkalipho couldn't, could he?

It was his mother for Christ sake.

My problem is with how Mnguni interfered with the investigation. Wasn't he mad that someone had left his son motherless? I can't get her picture out of my head. Gosh, she was so beautiful.

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Sometimes I just sleep it off when I'm in a bad mood. That's what I did after that snooping around and discovering family

deaths and hospital discharge letters. When I wake up Nzuzo and Sphiwe are running all over the house making noise, Nkalipho is being a chef in the kitchen. I take a shower and sit in front of the TV because I have no chore to keep me busy. The two noise-makers decide to join me. I've never seen Nzuzo this happy, I hope Salo gives birth to a boy. We were not close growing up but hopefully our children can be close. Nzuzo loves being around kids, he's the happiest, I love it when he sings. He has horrible vocals, he mixes the lyrics and adds his own sounds. He's a special child, my little prince. I love him with everything that he comes with.

“You love him, don't you?” says the voice.

I look away from Nzuzo, I didn't even realize he was standing here, I thought he was in the kitchen.

"He's my son," I say.

He smiles, I smile back. I guess we are over the last night incident.

"Why didn't you call me to come and pick you up?" he asks.

"I didn't want to disturb you from your work. I took taxis, I was fine."

"I don't think that was the reason, but it's okay. Would you like to have anything to drink?" he asks.

"No, I'm fine."

"I will be done in a minute." He flashes another smile and walks away.

I wonder how my mother is going to react when she finds out who I've been staying with while she was gone. Nzuzo will definitely tell the tales.

He dished for Nzuzo and Sphiwe first, they're running around with food. He's soft with children, but sometimes I think he allows too much bad behavior. They're scattering food all over the house and he's just watching them.

"Oh my goodness!" Someone exclaims at the door.

It's Masentle, I think she's seeing the mess these boys are making.

"I swear I thought they're alone here," she says when her eyes land on Nkalipho.

“They’re kids, I will clean up,” he says with a slight shrug.

Masentle shakes her head. “And you wonder why Sphiwe wants to stay here.”

They both laugh. She makes her way to me.

I think her role mode is Kim Kardashian, because wow.

“Look at you gorgeous!” she flashes a smile.

Me? Gorgeous? I have my face shining with tissue oil, there’s a spot I’m fighting with on my forehead, my hair is plainly just pushed back, what’s so gorgeous about me?

“Stop mocking me,” I say. She’s the one with full face-beat, straight weave hugging her shoulders and glittering evening gown teasing her ankles. She’s definitely going

somewhere, maybe a date-night with Mnguni.

“You’re natural and gorgeous, not me who have to doll up for your father-in-law to notice,” she says.

I ignore the father-in-law part and just compliment her.

“Anyway I’m here to ask for the little boy,” she says.

My eyebrow is up. “Nzuzo?”

“Yes, Sphiwe would love to have his friend for a sleep-over.”

“Why doesn’t he come over instead?”

She smiles, summoning her one dimple.

“They’ll drive you crazy, just let him come over, I’m sure he will love it.”

“I’m not sure about this,” I heave a sigh.

“Let’s call them and find out from them.”

**Well, I’m out-voted, Nzuzo wants to go,
Sphiwe wants him to come to their house
because his room there has its own TV. I
have to pack Nzuzo’s toiletries, at least it’s
just across the road, I can walk there if he
needs me.**

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**I suspected that Masentle coming here was
his plan, he wanted to be alone with me,
that’s why Masentle came here and took
Nzuzo. I can’t believe how far she’s willing**

to go for him, even helping him get a girlfriend, because that's what this is.

The last time I had a candle-lit dinner was with Nzuzo's father, before he got me in bed and impregnated me. He was still trying to impress, and oh boy, did I not fall head over heels for him. But little things don't matter in my world anymore, I know men can do anything to lure you in and once they've gotten what they wanted they dump you like used tissue. I'm just happy with the food, I haven't had so many salads on one plate in a long time. He cooked well, that impresses me a little bit. But nothing can take away the fear that I have, maybe I'll be at ease once I get answers. I feel like I'm sitting with a stranger, from that newspaper copy and pictures, he seems to

come from a dark past. Now I'm trying to connect pieces in my head, I'm noticing things that I paid no attention to in the past. He's weird, is he not? He's always been, my eyes just opened now.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I give him a nod, my thoughts are racing, so is my heart.

"I know I'm starting to irritate you," he says and chuckles. That chuckle hides how really scared he is. I don't know what gave him courage to even set up this dinner, in the morning he couldn't look at me in the eyes.

"But I will stop, only if you can give me something to work on," he says.

I take a sip of wine and look at him. Why can't I see past the young boy in the hospital bed? I don't want to know about his feelings, I want to know about that, his past.

“Maybe just point out what you don't like about me, if it's something I can fix I will do it. It's been a month Nondumezulu, I'm only human, my heart pumps blood, have a little sympathy, it's getting heavier on my side.”

I'm choking on the food, I take another sip to clear my throat.

Oh, he's looking at me and not eating his food.

“What did you say?” I ask.

He releases a deep breath and leans back on his chair.

Why am I the only one eating? I hope there's no poison in the food.

“You won't eat your food?” I ask.

“You're wasting my time, just tell me whether you love me or not. What's there to think about for months? Feelings are in your heart, not your head.”

That was very snappy. Where was this character hiding from all this time?

“Don't shout at me Nkalipho, I'm not your child,” I say.

He shuts his eyes, exhales heavily, opens them, and nods.

Good!

“You are putting unnecessary pressure on me, I said I’m still thinking about it. I’m a mom, there’s a lot to consider before I jump into a relationship,” I tell him.

“Maybe if you can share those things with me it will make sense. Because right now I don’t know where I stand, I don’t know if you don’t love me because I’m doing something wrong and keep doing it, or you still want me to prove myself. That’s why I’m asking for a clue. I’m lonely, I’ve been lonely, I wanted to fall in love, now that I have I want to share my life with you. Just consider me in your thoughts, in prayers, in your dreams and heart. I don’t know how else to say this other than that ngiyakuthanda and I want to be loved back.”

“Nkalipho!” I heave a deep sigh. He got me there, his words found a place in my heart. However, I need to know more than what he feels for me. I need to know the 10 year old Nkalipho Mnguni.

“I feel like I still need to get to know you better,” I say.

This is the best way I can put it.

“What do you want to know about me?”

Simplicity at its best.

“Like what happened to your stomach, where did you grow up, why are you neighbors with your father,” I say.

He’s clenching his jaws, his finger is tapping on the table restlessly. I don’t think he expected those questions, maybe he

thought I'll ask about his body count or something along those lines.

“Is there anything wrong with me being neighbors with my father?”

“Not really, I just think it's strange. Don't you want your own privacy? Do you enjoy living in his shadows?” I ask.

“If by living in his shadows you mean working for him, then yes, I don't mind because we started the company together, it's my legacy too. I'd rather build my own legacy than to help a white man build his and pay me once a month.” He's offended.

I didn't mean to upset him with that question, I'm the last person to judge people's jobs. There's nothing wrong with

him working in the family business, he's actually doing well.

"I grew up in Doornkop with my mom, she worked in the sugarcane fields, my father was still hustling in Durban." He says and picks the fork and starts eating.

That's it? I'm sure there was more, just like in those pictures hidden in his drawer.

"Why were you operated in the stomach? Did you have gallstones? My father had them as well," I ask.

He eats, gulps down his wine and eats more.

He's not looking at me, he's not comfortable.

Maybe I have asked enough questions for the day.

I also have to share my childhood and past with him; meeting him halfway.

“Is there anything you want to know about me?” I ask.

He doesn't answer, he's gobbling down his dinner.

Perhaps I should do the same; focus on the food.

Just when I'm about to do so, he speaks.

“My father cheated in Durban,” he says.

I lift my head, I'm disappointed in hearing that men have been cheating since the beginning of times, I thought it was just this new generation.

“He wasn't sending money anymore,” he continues.

I give him my full attention, he's ready to let me in, maybe this will give answers to other questions that I have.

"My mother was angry," he says.

I nod, I would've been angry too. Taking care of a child while working in the sugarcane field and then the fucker sends no money and starts cheating on me?

Never.

He picks his fork and starts eating again.

I raise my eyebrow, is he done? That was the whole story? It didn't even reach the climax, it ended in the introduction.

"What happened after that? Did she leave him?" I ask.

"No, she gave me the C-section scar, just like I gave her one when I was born. I bled

but I didn't die, I was hospitalized for three weeks. When I recovered she came and took me back with her, I had to go to school, I was 9."

I'm traumatized. What kind of anger would make me hurt Nzuzo to hurt his father? No, his mother was working at the sugarcane fields part-time and also working for the devil. First the eye injury, then the C-section scar? No ways, she was just evil.

"Is your mother still alive?" I'm just acting clueless.

"No," he grabs his glass and throws all the wine down his throat and reaches for the bottle to pour more. I have noticed that he's heavy on the drinks, I just hope he's not addicted.

“What happened to her?” I ask.

“She passed away when I was 10.”

I don't think he's going to say anything more after this. I'm left hanging, asking myself a million questions.

The death was investigated by the police but somehow Mnguni did not allow his son to participate in the investigation. Was it because he was too young and traumatized? Or there's more, his father was hiding him for another reason?

Why doesn't he sleep at night?

Why is he living close to his father?

What is he scared of?

I have a lot of questions, but the outstanding one regards my trust in him.

Do I trust him to be around him with my son? I feel like my guards have been down a lot lately, which shouldn't ever be the case because I have a son to protect.

He's pouring another glass...

No, I don't trust his drunk-self even more.

"Nkalipho you have to slow down," I say.

My heart is rolling drums, tonight it's just me and him in the house.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 16

SALO MHLONGO

The braai ended up starting late. There are more people than I expected. His team came with their partners and their sexy friends, his brother is here with a teenage-looking girl- so much for his God-like character. I didn't expect someone like him to be after young girls. He's old enough to be that girl's stepfather. A lot went wrong today, Zothani didn't tell me about this braai thing consisting so many people. I'm annoyed, sitting in his bedroom and wondering why there are skinny girls wearing bumshots in his house. I could've been in my place watching my favourite TV shows and eating a hot mutton pie. But I'm

stuck here, he shouldn't have brought me here, he knows I hate Salt Rock and his friends and his brother.

There's a knock at the door, I ignore it at first, but it persists.

"Come in," I say. What I'm really trying to say is, go the fuck away.

The girl Nkatha came with walks in. I hope she's not hoping for a sisterwife convo because I don't like her man, there's nothing we could talk about.

"Hi," she smiles at the door.

"Hello," I say, a bit cold.

"Can I sit with you?"

Sigh!

I nod, "Yeah, come in."

She closes the door and sits next to me. I love her box-braids, she's beautiful and simple than other girls that are here.

“I’m Nokwanda, Zothani said I will find you here.” She looks at me, I notice that her eyes are mostly on my tummy.

Pregnancy monitors!

“I’m feeling a bit down, I didn’t think there would be so many people.”

“Well, he’s a football coach, any braai he hosts his team come.”

I just shrug, Zothani could’ve communicated that with me.

“Would you like me to get you anything?” she asks.

“No, don’t worry. You should go and enjoy the braai with your man.”

Her eyes widen, she covers her mouth and giggles. Okay, that's a very young giggle, how old is she?

"You want Nkatha to kill me," she's still giggling.

I frown, I'm confused.

"What do you mean?"

"If he finds out I have a boyfriend he will kill me. I'm not supposed to date until I turn 25, that's like 6 years to come. Yet he had me when he was 20, parents are hypocrites. Jay and I are going to keep it a secret, hopefully Zothani won't find out."

Okay, I need to understand this. Now I'm staring at her, she has Zothani's straight nose and his forehead, with a round face and fair skin. So she's Nkatha's daughter,

not his underage girlfriend, God forbid! And she's secretly dating one of the players in Zothani's team. I'm ashamed of myself for thinking she was dating her own father.

"I hope you're being secretive and playing it safe as well." This is the best advice I can give, now I'm curious to see how old this Jay is, Zothani would die if he found out about this. How come he never told me he's an uncle to someone?

"Don't worry, I'm smart. When is my little sister coming?" she asks.

"Sister?" I raise my eyebrow.

"Well, I'm a girl, so it has to be a girl, otherwise it would be boring."

I can't help but laugh. "I hope your dreams come true, we have 8 months to find out."

“Are you going to marry Zothani? I want to start looking for a dress.” It’s so weird that she calls both of them by their birth-names, what kind of an African child is this?

“It’s his decision to make, so you should ask him,” I say.

“He has to marry you because he’s made you pregnant. That’s what Grandpa said, I heard Nkatha telling him.” She’s a singing bird.

I didn’t know I’d get married for the sake of the baby, more reasons why I should be mad today. But I still chat with Kwando like I haven’t been offended, we end up deciding to go down for a snack. Hopefully the crowd is in the balcony.

Indeed they are, they’re laughing outside.

We are waiting for my pie to warm up, my phone rings. It's my mother, I step away from the kitchen before I answer.

"Mama," I answer.

No response from her side.

"Are you there?" I ask and hear low sobs.

"Ma are you okay?"

"I'm tired Salabenzi..." she says.

Okay, I need to be somewhere more private.

I go to the bathroom and close the door and ask, "What's happening?"

"I didn't want to tell you this but I don't know who else to call. Your father has

broken me, he's crushed my heart
mntanami," she's crying.

I'm sure this is related to him cheating.
Honestly I don't know what to say, if she
was my friend I would've advised her to
leave him, but she's my mother and I want
them together for the sake of my siblings.

"Sometimes I ask myself what am I living
for." No, no, no!

"Don't speak like that mama, you have
children to live for."

"But none of you are here, I'm all alone,
crying myself to sleep," she says.

"I can come home first thing in the
morning, I just need you to promise me
that you won't do anything crazy," I say.

“If you come I won’t, I just want to be around someone who loves me, I want my princess.”

I never thought I’d ever feel so much anger for my father. He cheated and broke my mother’s heart, then he came here and told me not to go home knowing very well that she’s going through the most. Why is he so cruel?

Can this day get any worse? The morning seems to be so far, I want to see my mother, I want to make sure she’s okay. That’s my queen, whoever messes with her directly pokes the socket of my eye. I walk back to the kitchen, Nkatha is here with his daughter. It’s now awkward because I

thought they were an item. He'd probably hate me more if he found that out.

"Your pie is ready," Kwando says.

"Thank you," I open the fridge and take out a bottle of juice. "I will eat in the bedroom, do you have all your snacks?"

"Yeah, I'll come back for more if there's a need," she says.

I put my pie on the plate, careful not to look at Nkatha's direction, I've had enough negativity for a day.

"He's happy, thank you."

Was that him? I look up, he's talking to me.

"Who's happy?" I ask.

"I'm not a cold person, I love life, that's why I do what I do. He's been through a lot

in the past, I just wanted to be sure of your intentions. Pardon me if you felt judged, I'm sure you're also protective of your siblings," he says.

Wow, I didn't expect an apology from him.

"I love Zothani, he knows that. I wanted to have a baby before 30 and I couldn't have asked for a better man to create a life with," I say.

"He's going to be a good father, he has great examples to look up to."

Kwando coughs dramatically. How shady!

"Your birthday is in two months, you need presents," Nkatha says to her with his eyes narrowed.

That sounds like a threat.

“I’m kidding, you’re an awesome dad, a good example,” – Kwando.

He pinches her ear playfully, she’s giggling and running around.

I think mothers have soft spots for their sons and fathers have one for their daughters. I want a son, someone who will calm me down everytime I look at him.

With a girl it will be two bulls in one kraal.

They're cute to watch, this is a fun side of Nkatha I wouldn't have predicted it exists.

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NONDUMEZULU

Never in my wildest dream would I have thought my first romantic dinner in over 8 years would end with me begging a man to stop drinking. He's already drunk, he finished the whole bottle of wine alone, I only had one glass from it. Then he went to his mini-bar and started drinking beers, from there I knew things were going south. I bargained with him, threatened to leave and told him how bad it was that he was drinking like that while I'm around, even used Nzuzo as an excuse. None of it worked, he's lying on the floor now, I don't know when he fell from the couch.

I've never had to deal with a drunk in my life. I have no experience with drunk people. I've been thinking about calling Masentle, but a part of me feels like this is

my burden to carry for tonight. Maybe I forced him to remember traumatic parts of his life. Maybe this is my mess, my doing. I have to take care of it.

You really can't judge a book by its cover; this is not the man who yelled at me about the can in parking lot. Not that gentleman who makes green working uniform look like David Wej suits. He's a broken young man dealing with his demons and relying on the bottles for temporary relief. I look at him sleeping on the floor and my heart breaks, because if I had the money that he has I'd be the happiest. Right? It's sad that he's worked so hard not to be broke, only to remain broken like this.

I shake his shoulder and call his name.

He doesn't respond.

Maybe I should pour cold water on his face, that's how my mother woke me up back in the days. I open a bottle of sealed water and pour it down on his face.

His eyes slowly open, he looks at me with a frown and then slowly sits up. He wipes the corners of his mouth and looks around. I took away the last beer he was drinking, he's probably looking for it.

"You need to go to bed," I say.

"Where am I?"

Wow, okay.

"You're in your house, sleeping on the floor, you're drunk."

“What did you do to me?”

My eyes widen. Is he accusing me of something?

“Please don’t scream rape, I didn’t do anything to you,” I say.

He laughs, drags it longer than necessary.

“Let’s go to bed,” he says and gets on his feet. He staggers a bit but gets back his balance after leaning by the couch. He looks at me, “Asihambe.”

How do I tell him? Alcohol seems to be wearing off a bit but seemingly his memory isn’t fresh at all.

“We don’t sleep in the same room,” I tell him.

He frowns, “Why? Awungithandi?”

I don't answer that, I just lead him to the door of his room.

“Why are you so beautiful?” It's another question I won't answer.

I push the door and lead him to the bed. As soon as he sits, he lies on his back, shoes and everything on. I take a deep breath before untying his laces and pulling the shoes off.

He's staring at me, not asleep.

“Umuhle, you're so beautiful,” he says.

“Thank you, nawe umuhle,” I say pushing his feet in the bed.

I have to do it all, covering him with a blanket and switching his light off

I turn off the light, the switch is by the door, I take one foot out in the dark and hear him calling my name behind. He doesn't sound drunk, something makes me stop.

“Please don't switch the light off,” he says.

Oh, my bad. I switch it back on, then look at him. He's no longer lying on his back, he's sitting and facing where I'm standing.

I stand still, looking at him.

“For what it's worth, I do love you,” he says.

“We will talk in the morning, please sleep,” I'm begging.

“Sleep another night without you next to me? It's hard because I know you're in the the next room, yet so far away from my

heart. What must I do Nondu?

Mangikhuluma ngicela ungilalele, uma ngikhala ungizwe, ungangilimazi.” (Please listen to me when I talk, hear me when I cry, and please don’t hurt me)

“Nkalipho if I agree to be with you now it would be because I’m in your house, under your mercy. Not because I planned to, I’d be giving in to pressure, which I don’t want. When I say I love you I want to be comfortable, to be sure that I want this and I’m going to stick through it. I want it to be meaningful, I’m sure that’s what you want too.”

He nods, lightly. I’m not sure he understands it the way I want him to. I had my fair share of heartbreaks, I experienced

bad love at 16, it crushed me. I don't want to see our relationship in that light, I don't want to have doubts and questions when I'm already in.

“Life hasn't been kind Nkalipho, I'm struggling in every aspect of life. You're not just walking to a pretty face, I have burdens. I can barely support my family and my mother sent me to school. I have a fuckin' degree and nothing to show for it. When I close my eyes to pray words don't come out, only a storm of tears. I'm tired; emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Know me, know what I come with. Constant tears, mood swings, past heartbreaks, betrayal from friends and people I trusted the most, insecurities, lack of self-esteem...” My heart is pounding

hard against my chest. I'm struggling to breathe, my face is covered with tears. Why am I doing this to myself? He's drunk, not listening to my stupid grief.

"Please come back," he says in a soft, gentle voice.

I walk back to him, he opens his arm, I lie on his chest and allow him to breathe next to my face and cuddle me. I'm still crying, tears just won't stop pouring out. Out of everyone I could've vented to I chose him when he's drunk.

"Everything will be fine," he says, his hand running over my arm.

"When Nkalipho?" I'm tired of hearing this line.

“I don’t have a date but I know your situation isn’t forever. Unlike the screams in my head and the pool of blood I see everytime I close my eyes, that’s going to haunt me forever,” he says. I don’t think he’s aware of what he’s saying, he’s still under the influence of alcohol. He doesn’t want to talk about this, I tried earlier.

“Your mom?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he takes a deep breath and lifts my face.

I’ve stopped crying, he’s sleepy, or is it the alcohol?

“Nobody is perfect,” he says.

I don’t know if that relates to our conversation, I just nod.

“When I love, I love hard. I don’t care about your short-comings, I don’t care if you hurt me, I will protect you, I will say you’re a good person even if you aren’t to me.” Now I don’t think we are on the same page, he’s talking about something else.

“And I’ll keep hoping that one day you stop hurting me, that you see the damage you’ve caused already.”

Ok, he’s probably talking about, or to, his mother. Alcohol still playing its course.

“Nkalipho, it’s me,” I say.

He looks down at my face and inhales sharply.

“You’re here?”

Duh, we’ve been talking, I’m here.

He strokes my cheek with his finger when I start laughing.

“Why are you laughing at me?” he asks.

“Because you’re drunk and saying things that don’t make sense to me. If you want to share something with me, I want you to do it when you’re sober.”

“I am sober,” he argues.

Every drunk person denies that they’re drunk, they never own it.

“I will say stand and touch your toes,” I say.

He laughs, “I can touch my toes.”

“Okay, show me.”

He climbs out of bed and stands. He bends down to touch his toes, before his hands

even reach to his ankles he loses balance and falls.

I know it's childish to laugh at someone for falling but my maturity just flew out of the window. He stands up and makes another attempt, he falls harder.

"Stop, you'll get hurt," I'm still laughing.

"I'm not drunk," he insists, standing up again, he still wants to try.

"I believe you, you're not drunk, now get back in bed," I say.

Only then he agrees and comes back.

"You're a piece of work when you're..."

Okay, I can't say the word 'drunk' he will want to stand. I lie on his chest, he covers me with his arms.

“Don’t close your eyes, I don’t want to sleep yet,” he says.

Well, he never wants to sleep anyway.

Tomorrow I’m working, I have to get some sleep and his bed and embrace are warm enough to send me to lala-land.

“If you sleep first you’re weak,” he says.

That’s such a childish and drunk thing to say. I laugh with my eyes closed, I don’t care if he calls me weak.

He starts singing, right over my head:

“Walala kuqala uyinja! Walala kuqala uyinja!” (you sleep first you’re a dog, you sleep first you’re a dog!)

In my sleepy head that sounds like a lullaby, slowly I drift to sleep, a peaceful one.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 17

SALO MHLONGO

I woke up in a better mood today; I made breakfast for Zothani and served him in bed. He prayed before eating, it was a very random act, he didn't trust me not to poison him after I wasn't speaking to him for no reason after the braai. But we were on good terms when I left, I don't know if

it's hormones already, my moods swings are just bad these days.

I'm going home to see my mother, I want to be there before 10, which is her breakfast time. Shoprite has opened at the mall, I need their Black Forest cake to cheer my queen up. I thought I'd see Nondu at work but she says she didn't come today and she's not home. I think she's dating that construction guy, I just hope he's not another Solwazi, it looks promising for now seeing that he's with her and comforting her during this dark cloud hovering over her mother's family.

These cakes don't look fresh but I take one and add other goodies to the basket. Food

won't solve her problems but junk always numbs the pain, and my queen loves cakes.

I pack the shopping bags in the boot and get to my door

“Salabenzi,”

I hear someone calling my name, which is a very normal thing to experience because most people know me, I grew up in the township nearby. I turn my head to see Solwazi in a charcoal suit, he just parked his X6 two spaces away, it looks like he's with a woman. His P.A maybe, she's dressed in a skirt-suit and carrying a stack of files. She's flashing a smile next to him, just in case I'm a possible client.

“Hi,” I say with my hand on the opened door. I’m not sure why he’s coming closer with a smile on his face, Nondu and I aren’t best friends but we are blood, I inherit her beefs.

“You look good. Life is good, huh?” He still has that stupid smile on his face, the P.A or whoever it is remains standing by his car.

“Pregnancy glow. What’s up?” I ask.

“Oh wow, congratulations! You really look good, it must be a girl.”

I’m not really interested in small talks, I make sure that’s evident on my face.

“How’s your sister? I bumped into her a month ago and she was...it was a bad encounter,” he says.

“Bad encounter? Are you talking about you scolding your autistic son at KFC for touching you?” I ask.

He’s glancing back at his P.A, I’m sure his employees don’t know about Nzuzo.

“Which counter is she at? I need to speak to her,” he asks.

“Nondu is not at work today,” I say and close the door.

He’s on the window saying something, 8 years later he has something to say to Nondu, I’m not even going to tell her about this today, it will spoil her day. I drive off and leave him walking back towards his car with his shoulders held down in embarrassment. What an ass! If Zothani ever pulls a stunt on me I swear I’ll be

dragging him to court and telling him to sign his father rights away. We can't have men showing up for their responsibilities when it suits them; you're either in or out.

Well, the woman I was trying to surprise in bed is already up in the yard. This old generation, when do they sleep? She's singing her heart away while scrapping pots in the outside sink. I love her when she lets loose like this, waking up and just wrapping ibhayi over her breasts with pantyhose on her head and my father's black sleepers in her feet.

“Uvukile ugirl!” I say.

She raises her head and smiles. We are not best friends but all girls have codes.

“I had to, I didn’t want you to come to a dirty house,” she says.

I hate it when they treat me like a VIP in my own home.

“You didn’t have to, I thought I’d find you still in bed watching your morning shows. How are you feeling? I was worried about you.”

“I’m good, nothing can put a good woman down. There’s only one Busisekile Khumalo, your father knows this, hence he always comes home to me. I can never be reproduced, never subtracted or multiplied, there’s only one me!”

I know it’s a bad thing to cheer for this, feminine-wise, but they’re my parents and I want them together despite everything. My

father will come back and we'll be a happy family again.

I walk inside the kitchen with the shopping bags. She's already cooking, pots are steaming on the stove, when did this woman wake up?

“What are you cooking?” I yell.

“Beef stew and steam bread. You have to feed that baby.”

I roll my eyes, I just came to another version of Zothani. Who said pregnant women eat all the time? Not that I'm denying it, but food is not what I think about throughout the day, I eat when I'm hungry.

“Full meal in the morning, really Ma?”

“Cornflakes are not going to create a strong baby. Have you seen pictures of you as a baby? You were born 3.8, I never starved you.”

I laugh, “Okay, can I dish up? Is it ready?”

“Nooo! I will dish up, go to the lounge and relax.” She’s coming in, leaving the pots she was washing unattended.

I roll my eyes again, she still doesn’t want anyone to touch her pots when she’s cooking.

“I bought you a cake, do give me a slice after food,” I say as I head to the lounge.

I’m going to take full advantage of this and catch up on my favorite telenovelas, I haven’t watched TV much this week, Zothani is always around.

She follows me shortly with juice and freshly-made vetkoeks. They have cheese and polony, just the way I like them, what more can I ask for this morning?

She sits next to me and tells me to lower the volume. “You love these awful shows of yours. Have you spoken to Sbonga?”

“Yeah, she texted me last night,” I say.

“Did she tell you about the phone she wants?”

“She did but I told her I’m not buying her an iPhone. I mean, for what? Being a Youtuber is going to distract her from her studies. Most kids think they can make a living from Youtube, I’m sure that’s what she thinks as well.”

“But most of her friends are ready to subscribe for her content, you know how creative she is. She just needs a new phone with good quality since cameras are expensive and hard to find,” she says.

I didn't expect to come here and have this conversation. I can't believe Sbonga would put her up to this, the phone she's using was bought in December, it's still new, she just wants to move with trends. She's not considering that I still have to take care of our little brother as well.

“Sorry, I won't buy her an iPhone, I have to be mindful of how I spend the money now. I have a baby to prepare for, things have to change,” I say.

“Mhhhhh, I hear you. I guess she will have to compromise. Are you done with the plate?” she asks getting up.

I pass the plate to her. “These are delicious, you should open your own Fast Food truck ,” I say.

**“Where would I find the capital to do so?”
She laughs and walks away.**

**“We can raise it, who are we kanti?” I
increase the volume and put my focus back
on TV.**

**Damn, I didn't tell Zothani that I've arrived
safely, he will throw a fit.**

**He texts me back immediately: **I was
about to get in the car and drive there.
Have you fed my baby?****

I reply: **Yes, do you want me to send you proof-of-eating?**

He sends laughing emojis: **I love you two to death. I can't wait to feed you mutton pies when you come back**

Mention mutton pies and get me blushing and loving you for life.

“Why are you smiling alone? Is it the baby's father?” Ma asks walking in with a plate of steam bread slices and a bowl of beef stew.

I put my phone away, “No, I was reading a joke.”

“Must've been a good joke, huh.” She gives me the food.

I will gain 10 kilos before I leave this house. I dig in right away, this is the best stew I've

tasted in months, I'm licking my fingers as I eat.

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NONDUMEZULU

I thought I'd wake up first because I wasn't drunk when I slept. But I'm surprised to be up the last, I look around and the light shines right to my face. The sun is up, my heart starts racing. Nzuzo is late for school, my shift also starts at 8am, where's Nkalipho? I kick off the covers and dash to the door. I don't know even where I left my phone, I have to see what time it is. I rush

to the lounge and switch the TV on. Holy ghost, it's 8:44!

I think I left my phone at the dinner table, I have to call Masentle. I didn't realize I was getting fat, only now when I'm running out of breath for running from one room to another. I need to keep my weight in check.

"Nzuzo has been sent to school," the voice says behind me.

I turn and see him. He's topless, only wearing a short and exhausted expression on his face. I can't believe he sleeps drunk and wakes up active than me.

"Why didn't you wake me up? I'm late for work." I don't know how that became his fault, but I'm looking at him and I'm angry.

“Masentle spoke to Portia, I asked her to report you,” he says.

Take a deep breath Nondu...1...2...3.

“What did she say to Portia?” I ask.

“That you’re not going to be at work today. I tried to wake you up but you were tired.”

“You had no right to do that Nkalipho, no right!” I don’t go to work because it’s a cute thing to do, I need my job, I need money. How dare he jeopardize my job like that!

“My father doesn’t own the store, I cannot decide when not to show up for work. You are the one who got drunk, not me. All you had to do was wake me up, jeez!”

I feel like hot smoke is about to flow out of my ears and nose. And he’s just standing there looking at me like I’m crazy.

“Let’s go back to bed,” he says.

I hate that he’s calm, he doesn’t see anything wrong.

“I’m not going to bed with you,” I say.

“Okay, but thank you for coming last night, it was...great.”

My eyes pop out. What does he mean ‘it was great’?

“What was great?” I ask.

“You being there, waking up and seeing you in my arms changed a lot of things. I slept good, I haven’t had that in a very long time,” he says.

Why am I getting calm? My stare is getting softer on him.

“I’d like to apologize as well, not for not waking you up, you’re mad at the wrong person for that one. I’m sorry I drank the way I did, I never wanted you to see me in that state,” he says.

“Do you drink often?” I’m trying to ask if he’s a drunk.

“Not everyday but I drink,” he says, looks away briefly then rubs his nose. “You don’t like that, do you?”

“I can’t tell you how to live your life,” I say.

That wasn’t the answer he wanted, he stares at me for a minute and then pulls out his hand. I collect a deep breath before giving him my hand. He takes me back to his room, I have to make peace with the fact that I overslept and didn’t go to work.

If anything, Nkalipho and Masentle helped me, I should be grateful that my son went to school and I was reported absent at work.

I sit on the bed and pull the covers to my chest.

“It’s cold, let’s cuddle,” he says.

These cuddles are sending signals that are different from what I tell him.

“I ordered breakfast, it will be here in 30 minutes.” He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me. I don’t put up a strong fight, he gets me in his arms under the covers.

“Nondu,” he says taking a deep breath.

I know the conversation we are about to have. Relationship talk.

“Yes Nkalipho,” I embrace myself for it.

“Please stop fighting it,” he says.

“Fighting what?” I ask.

“The way you feel. I’m not going to hurt you, I promise.”

“What do you want me to say? I’ve talked to you, I thought you understood.”

He pulls me closer, I’m pressed against his chest and feeling every part of his body.

The hard and soft parts, some of his organs are more active than others.

“Please look into my eyes,” he lifts my face and fixes his gaze on me.

I’m looking at him, I know how I feel about him, I just need my mind to get into agreement with my heart and body.

“Just read me. Am I lying if I say I love you?”

“No, you’re not,” I say.

He lowers his lips to my cheek and plants a soft kiss. A flight of butterflies spread across my tummy. I had forgotten how it feels like to be loved and craved for like this.

“We can take things slow,” he says in a low whisper, his lips are still an inch away from my skin. I have skin bubbles, I keep swallowing nothing. “Just say the words, things don’t have to always be this awkward between us.”

I drop my eyes and say nothing. I know he knows, I wouldn’t let just any man cuddle me all night. It’s him because I feel

something for him, but I'm not going to disclose it yet, not under this roof on his instruction.

I hear him taking a deep breath, he squeezes me tighter and presses his hard front on me a bit harder. I'm feeling him, I'm sure that's what he wants.

I look at him, he's horny, his eyes are squinty. I let him be, he's breathing heavily and pressing his erection on me.

"So I was thinking about Sunday," he says, he has no control over his voice, it's wobbly.

"What did you think of?" I ask.

"That you should go to your aunt's funeral. Masentle will look after Nzuzo, I will drive

you there, you deserve to get closure, just like everyone else.”

“You can do that for me?” I’m stunned. That would be such a great thing, I’d love to attend the funeral.

“I can do anything for you,” he says.

My heart melts. I know my mother will be shocked to see me there, she made it clear that she wants me home with Nzuzo. But it won’t be a big deal if Nzuzo is safe, hopefully.

“You’re kind,” I say.

My hands rub the expanse of his back. I cannot deny that I love being in his arms, I love that he’s patient with me and he never raises his voice at me. I wish I knew more

about his struggles, but I cannot push it if he's uncomfortable.

I lift my eyes and find him staring at me.

“Why are you staring?” I ask.

He smiles and buries his head over my neck. His beard against my skin sends moisture between my legs. His breath is so warm.

“God knew I'd meet you, two months before I met you he was already preparing me for you,” he says.

Sounds like a romantic line to get a woman in bed.

“How so?” I ask with my eyebrow lowered in doubt.

“I haven’t shared a bed with a female in three months now.” That's a weird confession. He pushes his face down on my neck, I feel his lips rubbing against my skin, my breath is escalating.

“I have been saving myself for you,” he whispers.

I have fought a good fight for days, I represented baby mamas; we are not easy to get in bed. However men are likely to always get their way; he’s lifted my T-shirt and grabbed my boobs. He’s kissing my neck, I cannot keep my moans low.

He lifts his head, he’s coming for a lip kiss. I haven’t brushed my teeth, I don’t like being kissed in the mouth in the morning when my breath is not fresh.

I shut my lips tightly, he moves to my cheek and then goes back to my neck.

My clit is throbbing, he's not touching me there no matter how many signals I give.

"Nkalipho!" I gasp as he swirls his tongue on a certain spot below my ear.

"Ya baby?"

I'm down for a good fuck, he's turned me on, there's no turning back now. I grab his waist and slide my right hand in his shorts.

His shaft has grown so hard and thick, I wrap my hand around it and pull it out of the shorts.

"Condom," I say.

"Okay," he kisses my cheek and then gets off me.

Before he goes to take the condom he strips naked and helps me get my leggings off.

He puts the condom on standing on his feet. When he's done he pulls me to the edge by my legs and takes my soaked panty off.

My legs on either sides of his waist, his hands on my hips and eyes on what's between my legs. He lies on my chest and kisses my cheek again.

"I love you," he says.

I just inhale sharply and kiss his cheek.

His finger slides between my wet folds and rubs me.

"Ahhh!" I want the real pussy-fixer inside me right now.

He's a good reader of body language; he pulls my legs up on his waist and then slowly pushes his tip into my opening. I don't like it too big, I'm glad he's not the size of a buffalo, I can accommodate him. He pulls out before he's fully in and rubs his tip against my clit. Fara God, I needed that. My tongue is a team-player, whenever something teases my clit good it comes out to play on my lips. Maybe it's a habit I learnt during my 'hot girl' days. It's slutty. I think he loves it, his eyes are on my face.

He pushes his tip in again. I'm happy his shaft doesn't need hand support, he's pushing it right in with no support. I close my eyes and let my body feel every inch that he pushes in. Fuck, it feels so good, I

start rubbing my nipples and softly calling his name.

He's slow, gentle and steady. I love the sound he makes whenever he hits a spot.

“Ndume!” He's increased his pace.

I've never heard him shorten my name like that, I open my eyes and look at him. Right now I cannot tell where he's looking, at me or somewhere else. He pulls my leg to his shoulder, I'm stiff, I've never set my foot in the gym, I can feel my joints popping.

It gets better when he slides to the side a bit. He hits it deeper, with more pressure and increased pace. I'll say he's keeping the eye contact even though I'm not sure where he's looking at.

“I can't baby...I'm sorry.”

I'm not sure what he's saying until he lets my leg down and spreads my labia with both his hands and pounds on me till my inner-thighs go numb. I'm calling his name, he's calling mine, before I reach the endpoint he falls apart.

“Fuck!” he curses with sweat rolling down.

He doesn't pull out, he's cum but he's not done. He can still push until I reach my destination, with the help of his hand of course.

His heavy breaths are so sexy.

He lifts his eyes to me, my lips spread into a lazy smile.

“I love you,” he mouths the words.

I just wink at him and lick my lips.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 18

THE ZUNGUS

The second grandchild is on the way; different son, same nature (out of wedlock). Zothani's mother is more disappointed in him, she thought she'd have someone making tea for her before she holds another grandchild. On the other side his father is happy, he's a man, he understands that these things happen. As perfect as they're

now, they also had Nkatha out of wedlock, he's the reason they got married in their early 20s. If Zothani really loves this girl, he can do the same and just marry her.

“A child has to grow up in a warm home with both parents,” Zungu says. He's been trying to push this idea through Nkatha since Zothani trusts his judgment more.

Nkatha nods in agreement, one of them has to marry.

Zothani gives him a look. He also didn't marry Nokwanda's mother, they didn't even last a year after Nokwanda was born. In this case he should keep his neck straight and nod for nothing, he's the last one to talk.

“Of course I want that for my child but I don’t think marriage is something we should be thinking about right now. Maybe after Salo has given birth,” – Zothani.

“Aah!” Mam’ Zungu sighs.

What a let down! She was already planning this wedding in her head. She was only 22 when she married Zungu; pregnant and scared, she did not enjoy her wedding. This was the time for her to re-live those moments through her son’s wedding, she was going to be hands-on, in fact hands-all-around, with the planning.

“You never listen to your father, you always want to do the opposite,” she snorts angrily. Zothani has always been a problematic child, even though many

would disagree with her because things eventually worked out for him. He's successful and good at what he does; he's coaching, his team plays for NFD. He defied every rule his parents set, went on his own way and did Sports Sciences instead of acquiring a profession recommended for him.

"I'm sorry Ma, I have to go and take a bath," he pushes his chair and walks away from his mother's lounge. It was Nkatha's decision that they come home, Zungu is grown and always struggling with random muscle pains. Nkatha being a child in medicine it has become his responsibility to monitor the health of an old man. He had to drag Zothani along because all he does

lately is his training sessions with his team and be nestled up with Salo all week.

He left his phone in the charger, it rings. Nkatha checks who the caller is. Wifey? Okay. He rushes to the bathroom to give Zothani the phone.

“Thanks brother,” Zothani wipes his wet hands on the towel he’s wrapped his waist in. He hasn’t been able to get Salo on the phone since morning, she must’ve finally remembered that she has a boyfriend.

“Really? I’ve been calling and calling and calling.” Someone is pissed off. Those moods again!

Zothani rubs his forehead. Nkatha realizes that it’s going down, he was down this road

19 years ago, he laughs under his breath and walks away. At least now there's that one person who can put Zothani in his place. It all thanks to Salo that he threw away the annoying three earrings. He did his piercings when he was in Grade 12, against the word of their parents. He was rebellious like that.

After talking to her on the phone Zothani's face lights up. He goes to his room and dresses up and comes back to join the family in the lounge.

"We need to pray," Zungu says unexpectedly.

Zothani lifts his eyes to Nkatha, if there's one thing they have in common as different as they are, it's their dislike of constant

prayers when they're home. You can pray twice a day and give the poor son of Christ a break. He can't be receiving ten prayers from one person a day, what about other people? Here, at the Zungus, you even pray and thank God before drinking a glass of water.

"All of us," Zungu commands and lifts his wrinkled eyes to Zothani. "Especially you, pray for your life." He's always encouraged his sons to be closer to God. He's a man of prayer, his whole life he's been guided by the holy spirit.

They all close their eyes, Zothani is expected to pray more aggressively to show that he's taking this serious. But he's the softest, nobody can hear what he's praying

for. He's never been good with prayers even though he believes there's God. It's weak communication skills from his side, he just doesn't know how to structure his prayer, when he was young he would end up stealing lines from the big prayer; Our Father.

His mother's prayer starts getting louder than everyone's. She always wants God to hear her first; these are her stunts. Except that today she's praying with tears running down her face, she just felt it coming- that urge to shout at God and command for his forbearance and forgiveness.

“He's a child Bawo, if there's anywhere he's done wrong show him the way, don't punish him. Guide his feet so that he walks

on your path, have mercy. Shine your light on his face Moy' ongcwele, don't be hard on him..." – Mam' Zungu appeals to God with tears running down. Just like her husband, she lets the holy spirit guide her in life.

This is a part where both sons open their eyes in the middle of the prayer. Nkatha opens one eye and looks at Zothani's direction. He finds Zothani's one eye open as well.

"What did you do?" he silently mouths the words.

Zothani shrugs; this time he really didn't do anything to get on the wrong side of the man above. His parents would pray like this for him whenever he got into trouble

growing up. Today he has no idea why he's
being prayed for so hard.

They close their eyes before getting caught.

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SALO MHLONGO

It looks like I will leave without seeing
Nondu, apparently she hasn't been home
since her mother left for the funeral
arrangements. My mother thought she left
with her mother, she was quite surprised
when I told her Nondu said she's not
allowed to go to the funeral. I don't know

the whole situation, I don't even want to, I love my peace.

Anyway I have two full Tupperware boxes filled with the beef stew and steam bread. It's for me to feed the baby and Zothani. Mothers are always dramatic, she packed brown sugar for me to use for porridge because the white one is too sweet and not healthy.

She has a few stokvel friends keeping her company when I leave.

“Don't forget next week I have to attend MaNtanzi's wedding anniversary, you have to drive me there, I can't take taxis,” she's walking me out.

“You can take taxis,” I say.

“No, they have to see me arriving in my daughter’s car.”

Exactly! That’s all she wants, not that she can’t take taxis, she uses them daily.

“Okay, we will stay in touch,” I say hugging her goodbye. I’ve never come home and left without seeing my father, it does hurt a bit. But I’m glad my mother is laughing and being the MaKhumalo that I know. She’s not letting this ‘cheating demon’ put her down or end her marriage. They’ll work it out, hopefully with Aunt Teekay dead my father will keep his pants zipped.

I have to confront Sbonga about the iPhone issue after she comes back from her classes, the fact that she went and spoke to

mom about it means she didn't care about what I told her last night. She thinks I harvest money from trees, ungrateful child!

I ate before I left home, I'm full. But beef stew is not mutton pie, hence I'm driving through Stanger CBD and heading to Pie City. I buy 3 mutton pies ; 2 for myself and 1 for Zothani to put in the fridge for me to eat later.

I call him before I drive out of Stanger, I miss him.

He's taking his time answering, little things like this piss me off.

"Really? I've been calling and calling and calling," I snap as he finally answers.

"I was in the bathroom baby, and you only called once, but I'm sorry."

I take a deep breath, calming myself down.

“Where are you?” I ask.

“I’m home, I’ll be going back to my house at 5.”

“So you’re not coming to my place today?”

I’m emotional about this.

I feel so pregnant and alone.

“I will come baby, with your mutton pies.

Are you back already?”

“No, I’m about to drive out of Stanger, I will be in Tongaat in 30 minutes.”

“No, 1 hour! Don’t drive like you’re crazy.”

I’m rolling my eyes, I said that on purpose to wind his emotions. I’m a good driver; always complying with the road rules.

“I will see you at 5, my mother gave me steam bread and mutton stew because you and the baby are underfed,” I say.

He laughs out loud.

“That’s true, have you seen how skinny I’m getting ever since I met you? Please put my food in the microwave, I want my stew warm and fresh.”

“Okay baby, I’ll be counting hours,” I say.

“I love you, please drive safely with my munchkin.”

There’s a bit of traffic after exiting the N2 and turning onto Watson Highway, I’m already nauseous, it feels like I’ve been on the road forever. I’m stuck behind a huge towing truck, my nerves are worked up. I

only escape it when I turn onto High Street, but I'm already feeling sick of the road and the smell of the engine. I'm a little dizzy, I slow down a bit, if it persists I will park at the side and call...

Who's calling my name?

Is it my ears? I'm alone in this car.

"Sally, be careful!" It comes again, a very familiar gravelly voice. I'm not imagining it, that's my babomdala's voice, Nondu's father. He's calling my name, telling me to be careful, to watch out.

"Where are you babomdala?" I ask, my hands are no longer on the wheel, I don't know when I let go. I know it's stupid because we buried him, I was there, I know he's dead. But that's him, that's how he

called me. I was the only thing he loved that came from my father, he didn't meet me until I was 2 years full, there was some family shit going on, but when he was finally allowed to meet me he loved me, I reminded him of their mother.

“Babomdala!” I scream.

My eyes are blurry, there are hoots all around me, people screaming and tyres screeching. I hear a loud bang and turn upside down on my seat. Car accident, that's the thing that comes to my mind before everything shuts down.

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Beeping machines!

Oh fuck, this is so unreal. So now I'm waking up in the hospital or clinic like movie characters. Did I lose my memory too? Is there a handsome man by my side staring at me? Of course not, I just can't move my neck. I cannot move my head around but I can hear that someone is standing right next to me.

"You're fine, you're at the hospital," she says.

"I'm fine?" That's very funny coming from someone connected to no part of my body. I'm far from being fine. Now I can see her, she's moved to the front. Without any uniform on I cannot tell what she is, but she's writing something on the file and

glancing at the annoying machine next to me, I guess she knows what she's doing.

“Can you help me? I'm in pain,” I ask.

“I will give you something for pain. Do you know how you got here?”

“I think I do, car accident,” I say.

“I'm very sorry about that. You're very lucky, both you and the baby survived. It's still unbelievable given how damaged the car was; your airbags were completely deployed, the seat belt could've hurt you...” I don't hear the rest of what she's saying, I forget about the pain, my hand is over my tummy. My munchkin, how did I not remember? My munchkin is still alive! What kind of a mother am I?

I'm crying, because my baby could've died, I didn't think, I shouldn't have been driving alone such a long distance.

"I heard my dead uncle's voice calling me. Am I suffering from a mental illness?" I ask the doctor. I'm sure they've ran tests, she said I got here five hours ago, she'll know if I'm mad or the voice I heard was real.

"We will look into it Ms Mhlongo," she says and gives me something for the pain. "If needed counseling will be provided for you, for now just rest."

"Thank you. Can I call my boyfriend?"

"He's outside, coming back," she says and flashes a gentle smile.

I don't know how or when Zothani got here, I'm just glad that our munchkin is still

alive. I don't know what answer I would've given him if something had happened.

A nurse walks in, she's wearing a full uniform and pissed expression on her face. Now this is the type of nurse I know. She leaves a scanned document with the doctor and walks away high on her black heels.

The doctor's face changes as she reads through. Does it concern me? It looks like a thing that belongs to me, she's slid it into my file as well.

“What is it? My baby is okay, right?”

She looks up, smiles a bit. “Your baby is fine, there's just something we need to look into and take care of, you shouldn't worry about it, you're in best hands now.”

I hear his footsteps, fuck my neck for not moving easily. I forget about the document that's worrying my doctor, the father of the little survivor is here.

“Baby,” he kisses my cheek.

He stands where I can see him. Jesus, he looks like he was the one in a car accident.

“The baby is fine,” I say.

“You two are my fighters, thank you so much baby. I don't know what would've become of me if something had happened to you.” He grabs my hands and kisses each.

“I'm grateful, God came through for me,” he says.

I force a smile. Between God and my late uncle I don't know who to thank more.

“I want to call my mother, do you have your phone?” I ask.

He takes it out of his pocket and dials the number as I call it out. He holds the phone for me and put the call on loudspeaker.

“Ma, I’m alive!” I break into tears when she answers.

“Huh? Were you supposed to be dead?”

“I had a car accident,” I tell her.

“Whaaaat? Oh yini, imoto injani?”

“The car?” I look at Zothani.

“I think it will be written off,” he says.

“What? Oh, my child’s car!” She starts wailing on the other side.

“Ma, it’s just the car, me and baby are fine.

The doctor promises that I’m in good

hands, everything will be taken care of,” I say.

I don't know if she's hearing me, all I hear is loud wails.

“Imoto yomntanami!”

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 19

NONDUMEZULU

I don't have suitable wear for funerals, like black attires and big hats and sunglasses.

I'm wearing my dark green wrap-dress and scarf on my head. Nkalipho is dressed up in a black shirt and jeans, I think he's going to attend the funeral and not just drive me there and leave like I initially thought. My mother's cousins can be a bit nosey, I know I'll be answering a lot of questions regarding my relationship with Nkalipho. Since I messed up and got pregnant as a teenager people always kind of throw their unsolicited advices and want to tell me how to live my life. I know there will be someone telling me not to burden my mother with another child.

Arms wrap around my waist, I'm brushing my teeth in the bathroom. No, we are still not dating, what happened that day was a once-off thing. I've been sleeping in my

room and him in his; he hasn't made any other sexual advance. So my heart skips a beat when I feel that it's him standing behind me.

I rinse the toothbrush, pretending not to care that he's holding me. I'm not sure what he wants, for the last two days he seemed to be respecting that I'm not ready to answer his big question.

"Nkalipho, let me go," I say softly. I can't turn around with him holding me like this, I will turn to his face, God knows what could happen.

"I just want us to talk," he says.

Breathe! We haven't "talked" in a while. For him talking means us discussing our

relationship status, which now looks dramatic from my side.

I turn to his chest, my eyes briefly lock with his before I look away. I don't know man, I've been more gentle with him ever since he laid the pipe on me. Now I look like the shy one, tables have turned.

“Ngibheka phela,” he's lifting my chin.

I look at him, my breath sharpens, he's staring right back at me.

“You look beautiful,” he touches my head, smiling. I think it's the scarf I wrapped, he's now seeing a potential future housewife that's going to bear children for him and wash his feet every evening.

He lifts my left hand and looks at it.

“There’s one thing missing; the ring, then you’d look like Mrs Mnguni.”

So spot on with my thoughts! A normal me would be snapping and telling him marriage is not all that there is to a woman, the fact that I wrapped my head doesn’t mean I’m advertising myself for marriage.

But this man knows me naked now, I’m actually blushing.

“Another week has come to end, I still don’t know where I stand,” he says.

“Come on Nkalipho, we’ll be late for the funeral, an unmarried woman is buried by 12pm.” I’m now too weak to stand up against him and argue, it’s better I just escape the conversation.

“Are you going to tell me when we come back?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I nod with a smile.

This feels like those days in high school when you promised a boy his love letter response after school and wish you can just drop dead when the school bell rang in the afternoon.

“Ngiyabonga,” he links his forehead onto mine. We share a close eye-contact, I’m tempted to stand on my toes and kiss his lips. God, I love...I want to see more of him, in this close angle, I feel closer to him.

“You can do it, you don’t have to fight it,” he says in a low voice.

Fuck it, I wrap my hands around his neck and go in for a smooch. He wanted it too6,

so badly. He's pinned me against the sink, his hands are all over my butt, he's kissing me like he wants to fuck. It's hot, breathy, rushed, and filled with in-between moans.

"Lume!" the little voice breaks into the bathroom.

Earth open up and swallow me, now! At some point we both have to turn and explain to him what the hell we are doing. The door wasn't closed, he's seen everything.

Nkalipho finds the courage to face him first.

"Hey boy," he's pulling his shirt out. So much for the cute formal look, right now he needs to pull the shirt over his hard front.

"You're fighting with mommy?" – Nzuzo.

We look at each other. Were we that aggressive? My heavy lip tells me we were.

“No, I was kissing her,” Nkalipho says.

I swallow nothingness. Really vele?

Couldn't he just lie and say something else.

“Why are you kissing her in the mouth though?” He looks really confused, his eyes are on me, he's still standing by the door.

My poor baby!

“Because I love her,” Nkalipho says.

My lips stretch to my ears. I've never had these heart-warming, yet so embarrassing moments in front of my son. He's never heard any man telling him he loves his mother. He's never seen me being kissed and loved by a man.

“Do you like that?” Nkalipho asks him.

He looks at me, then shakes his head.

I crack into laughter.

“You don’t want me to love your mother?”

“No, kiss her here only.” He turns his face and shows Nkalipho his cheek. I didn’t expect that, why is he jealous of me being kissed in the mouth because he’s the one who broke up our mouth-kissing relationship two years ago.

“Okay, I will kiss her only on the cheek.”

Nkalipho pulls me closer and kisses my cheek lightly. I wouldn’t survive this, waste of kisses.

But Nzuzo is happy with it, we’ll just have to keep the act in front of him and swallow each other when we are alone.

We are leaving Nzuzo with Masentle, she's always on standby. She's a good stepmother to Nkalipho, although it's a bit weird because she's not that older than him. There's no possible way she could fill the gap of his mother. I don't know how to describe it, maybe she's just helping her husband, Mnguni must be having a lot of regrets and trying to compensate every way possible.

I hand her Nzuzo's bag, Sphiwe is already waiting for his friend impatiently. She takes the bag and looks at us, both in the eyes as if searching for something.

Nkalipho clears his throat, "We have to go. When is dad coming back?"

“He should be here in an hour or so,” she’s still looking at us, now smiling.

Is it obvious now? We aren’t official yet, I haven’t confessed anything.

“Have a safe trip love-birds,” she turns around and walks away.

What? No, we are not there yet. “Masentle, we are not...”

I don’t finish, Nzuzo looks back at Nkalipho and says; “No kisses in the mouth Lume.”

Masentle laughs and pulls both boys away.

This is going to be public news now, he’s going to tell everyone.

I turn to Nkalipho, “Let’s go.”

He doesn’t move, I look up and he’s glaring at me.

“What now?” I ask.

“Do I mean anything to you?”

How did we get here now? He looks angry,
I’m confused.

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I just traveled an hour with an angry man
who’s not speaking to me. I think he’s
angry that I wanted to tell Masentle that we
are not love-birds. Maybe he should be
angry about it, but I still think he’s being
dramatic.

We have arrived at my grandmother’s
house at H2 Esikhawini. I thought there
would be a tent, you know black funerals.

But it's quiet, you'd swear they're about to bury an Indian. It doesn't look like there's anything happening.

I climb out of the car and go to the gate. It's locked, from here I can see the closed front door. Nobody is home. What's happening here? I'm not mad, this is my grandmother's house, I was here last November.

"Are we at the right place?" he says behind me.

Now we are talking again?

I look back at him, "I know my grandmother's house Nkalipho."

"But it doesn't look like anyone is home. Are you sure the funeral is held here?"

Could they be at the hall or church? I didn't think of that, now I need to call my mother and find out where they are.

Let me check if I still have airtime.

R65? When did I upload so much airtime?

This is 10kg maize meal bag from the Pakistan shops. Fuck, I hope my bank didn't automatically...

I look at Nkalipho, "Did you transfer me airtime?"

"Was I wrong? I just heard you complaining about data."

No, he was very right. But had he given me this R65 I would've bought only R12 airtime and saved the rest.

“Thank you so much,” I say before scrolling down to my mother’s number and calling her. Thank God it’s going through.

She answers, her background is surprisingly very quiet for someone at the funeral service.

“Ma, I’m here outside grandma’s house, where is the funeral kanti?” I ask.

“You’re where? What are you doing there? Didn’t I tell you to stay at home until I come back? Where is Nzuzo?” Hhayi-bo this woman!

“Really Ma? She was my aunt, I made a plan to be here, don’t shout at me like I broke the rule,” I’m in disbelief.

I hear shuffling sounds, then she speaks to someone in the background.

**“Talk to this child before my BP rise up,”
she says.**

**Babo’s roars through the speaker of my
phone. Why is everyone so angry? I’ve
never heard Babo this mad. He’s telling me
to leave, they’re handling everything and
need me to be with Nzuzo.**

**“Babo is there even a funeral taking place?”
I’m also mad because I don’t deserve this.**

No answer.

“Babo?”

Silence...

**I look at the screen, the call has been cut.
Obviously my airtime didn’t finish, I’m
airtime-rich, he dropped the call, how rude!**

I turn to Nkalipho blinking back tears.

“I’m not wanted, let’s go,” I walk back to the car and hop on to my seat.

He comes back with his head hung low. He keeps looking around, I don’t know what he’s hoping for, they’re not here.

There’s a woman coming my way with a big container on her head. I roll up the window, I’m not in the mood for neighbors.

Nkalipho, what’s wrong with him? Why is he approaching the woman instead of coming to the car. He stands with her, they talk for a minute before she walks past the car. Thank God she didn’t suspect that I’m in this car.

Nkalipho gets on his seat and closes the door.

“Is that the neighbor?” he asks.

“Yeah, she’s two houses away,” I say.

“She hasn’t heard anything about the passing of your aunt or the funeral.”

Now that’s confusing, in black communities funerals are a big thing, everyone would know and attend the funeral just to get to the bottom of death and see who’s crying harder.

“Why is your mother hiding this?” he asks me.

I shrug, “I have no idea.”

“Could it be untrue that your aunt died?”

“Why would she lie about something so bad?” Gosh, my head is pounding.

“It just doesn’t make sense now, I feel like you’re being lied to, maybe they’re

protecting you or your aunt from something,” he says.

“Can we leave?” I lean back on the seat, shut my eyes and release a deep breath.

Phewww!

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I got here and took a nap. I was horn-mad, I didn't want to see Masentle and get asked what happened to the funeral. I also don't know, at this point I just want my mother to come back so that I can drill her with questions.

I'm woken up by little hands on my face. I open my eyes to Nzuzo playing next to me, he's on my bed with his shoes on.

"Mommy wake up!" He's very excited.

"I'm awake," I say with a yawn.

"No, Sugar Rush, wake up!" he's screaming ecstatically.

I have no choice but to sit up. He's actually dressed up, he looks fresh.

"Did you take a bath?" I ask.

"Yes, Sugar Rush," he's jumping on the bed.

Nkalipho walks in, he's changed his clothes too, he's now wearing tracksuits.

"You're finally awake," he smiles and leans over to kiss my cheek.

“I didn’t have a choice. What is a Sugar Rush?”

“Sugar Rush Park, I want us to go there with him, our Sunday is boring anyway.”

“Okay, it doesn’t look like I have a say in this anyway.” I get out of bed and leave them to have a snack and change this dress.

I’m in the kitchen snacking on yogurt, my phone rings. It’s Salo calling, maybe she knows what’s going on with her father and my mother.

“Hey Salo,” I answer.

“Hi, have you heard from my dad?”

“We spoke about two hours ago,” I say.

“I can’t get hold of him, I’m at the hospital, I had a car accident.”

“Oh no, are you alright though? Is the baby okay?”

“We are alright, I just need my dad,” she says.

“I got him through my mother’s phone, maybe you should try her. Which hospital are you at? We are going to Ballito, we can pass by and see you.”

“Mediclinic Victoria,” she sounds so down.

I’m sure Babo doesn’t know this, such an unfortunate tragedy.

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I asked that we start at the hospital before taking Nzuzo to Sugar Rush Park. I'm worried about Salo, she's probably all alone there feeling deserted. I feel so bad, we should start checking on each other more. Imagine finding out that your sister had a car accident one day later, what kind of a family is this.

Nkalipho was a gentleman enough to take me to the shops, I have brought fruits and a few snacks for her. We are all going in, I can't leave them in the car.

She's not connected to any machines, she's breathing on her own, that's a good sign.

We walk in, she's not alone, there's a man seated on the chair. He must be the baby's

father; the tall, dark and handsome type with huge muscles.

“You’re here already?” Salo says, her face brightening up.

“I wanted to get here as soon as possible. How are you feeling?”

“My neck still can’t move, my right leg is injured, my ribs sustained some injuries as well, but I’m alive and out of danger,” she says.

“Thank God! This is Nkalipho by the way, the construction guy.”

She chuckles, “I recognize the face. And who’s that other little dude?”

Nzuzo starts giggling.

“Introduce yourself, what’s your name? I don’t know you.”

“Nzu, Nzuzo-Profit,” he finally says.

Everyone laughs.

“Who’s your mother?” Salo asks.

He looks at me with a grin.

“Your aunt?” – Salo.

He points at her and breaks into a fit of laughter.

Salo demands a hug from him.

I stand at the side of her bed, our boyfriends are on the other side.

“That’s Zothani Zungu, munchkin’s father,” Salo says.

They shake hands and start talking. This could be cute, hey.

Salo turns her eyes to me, “So you’re dating?”

I look at him, if I say no he could give me another hour of silent treatment.

“Yeah, we are dating,” I say.

“And he’s taking Nzuzo to Sugar Rush Park? I love this,” she says.

“Let’s hope it works. Tell me how did you end up here? What happened?”

She tells me from the start when she drove out of Stanger after buying pies. It gets weird when she says she heard my father’s voice telling her to be careful before the accident. I’m happy she survived, I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to her. But I’m uncomfortable with my father coming through for her when he’s never

visited me even in my dreams. Did he forget about me? That man let me go to interviews and not get the jobs. He watches me suffer. All along I thought he was unable, but he's able to come through for certain people, just not me and my mother.

“I told my mother about it and all she cared about was the damaged car. Zothani says I'm being emotional about it, but I'm hurt. I thought she'd call me back at least and follow up on me and the baby's health. But nothing, she only called to tell me that some stupid Ngobese man fixes cars, no matter the condition. I'm angry Nondu, I want my father.”

“I'm so sorry,” I don't know what else to say.

My mind is still on my father. I'm thinking about what Nzuzo told me, was my son right about ihlahla being taken? My father is active for another family.

“Mommy...mommy,”

I turn my head, everyone is looking at me. How long has Nzuzo been calling me?

“Hey baby,” I give him my attention.

“I want to watch football.”

I'm confused.

Zothani smiles, he's also suffering from the Nzu pulling effect.

“I invited him to a game, I'm hosting a match for the boys, we will have different

teams coming over. He can come with me, he says he loves football,” he says.

Okay, it seems like we attract babydaddies who are into sports. Hopefully he won't be another Solwazi.

“Can you go with him?” I ask Nkalipho. He's the only one I trust with my son.

“You don't have to ask,” he says.

Our eyes lock for a second. What is this guy doing to me?

I clear my throat and look at Salo. “Let's call my mother and see if she can give Babo the phone.”

I hope she answers. It rings a couple of times, then someone answers. It's the man we are looking for, I give Salo the phone.

She talks with tears, telling him that she had a car accident coming from home. I expected him to be sympathetic and comforting. But yoh, I've never heard this man shout like this.

“You don't listen, your ears are filled with kak. Both of you! You can't follow a simple instruction, goddamnit!”

“Babana!” the princess cries a river.

I'm on the side catching bullets as well.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 20

NONDUMEZULU

My mother is coming back tomorrow!

I'm happy like a young child who just heard that her mother is coming back from town.

I enjoyed my stay here, Nkalipho and his family were nothing but kind. However I missed home, so did Nzuzo, we are both running around and packing our clothes.

When I asked about the funeral she just said we will talk tomorrow, I'm hoping for a good explanation. Now I'm starting to believe what Nkalipho said, there's so much that doesn't add up about Aunt Teekay's death. If my mother really faked the death with Babo, then there must be a

good reason to it. My life is like a movie, I tell you.

“Baby did you pack all your shoes?” I ask when Nzuzo walks past my door.

He comes back and stands at the door.

“Yes,” he says.

Okay, then what does he want staring at me like that?

“Mommy,” he’s got such a sweet voice for a boy child. My heart always melts when he calls me mommy so calmly.

“Yes baby,” I stop folding the dress and give him my full attention.

“When I play football, am I going to be like those kids with a big man?”

Firstly he's not going to play football, he was invited to watch the match. Secondly, who is the big man and who are 'those kids'?

"Do you want to be like them?" I ask.

"Yeah," he nods.

"Then you'll be like them, you can be like any kid you want to be like," I'm just saying this for positive vibes. He seems happy with the response.

I finish packing and leave my bags on the floor. I don't want anything to delay me in the morning. Nzuzo is playing his car on the floor, his N2 is the passage leading to the kitchen.

I join Nkalipho in front of the TV, he's watching Teen Titans, strange.

“Do we ever get a break and watch shows of our choice?” This is my last night here, can't we watch a romantic movie? The remote-boss is not even here.

“We can even watch Idols Extras and laugh at bad singer,” I suggest. That's what I always do when I'm having a bad day, I watch and laugh at people who are trying to chase their dreams, I'm miserable like that.

“Randall Abrahams is my best judge, I love his brutality,” I say.

Okay, I'm talking alone here. I turn my head and look at him. He's staring at the TV but I'm not sure he's watching, I know

him enough to see that he's not okay. He's not a moody person, I don't know what angered him, he was okay when Nzuzo and I went to pack.

He can see that I'm looking at him, he chooses to just ignore him. Maybe I'm the problem, I keep my mouth shut and watch the Teen Titans. Nzuzo gets tired of playing alone and comes to sit on my lap, he's the only one watching and enjoying the TV. I'm in my head asking myself what have I done wrong. Gosh, I hate silent treatment.

After a while he stands and puts his slops on. Then he brushes Nzuzo's head and tells him to have a goodnight. This confirms that something is wrong, he's never went to bed before us.

I lift my eyes to him, he's in grief.

"You too," he says.

I don't respond, Nzuzo is glued to the TV.

He leaves, my heart just breaks. What did I do?

By the time the Titans end Nzuzo has fallen asleep on my lap. Seriously, I cannot carry him, sadly I cannot ask Nkalipho to help me today, I have no choice but to wake him up. I pull him to the room and help him get in bed. I sit with him for a while cuddling him and keeping him warm. My mind is running, building and destroying mountains. I'm in love with Nkalipho, that's why I'm this affected by the change

in his mood. I thought we'd create more memories on our last night together.

Eventually, I switch off the light and leave Nzuzo to his tight sleep. I go to the room assigned to me and change to my short pyjamas. I get in bed and just stare at the ceiling wondering if he's sleeping in his room. Only if I could get inside his head and read his thoughts!

Actually, I can. Not in his head, but I can get in his room and try to find out. If he doesn't tell me that's on him, but I would've tried. What am I still waiting for?

I knock outside his room a couple of times before he opens. It doesn't look like he was asleep, he's barefooted and topless. I swear

he hates covering his chest. He gets in bed,
I sit on the edge below.

“I just want to check up on you, you don’t
seem okay.”

“I’m okay,” he’s not looking at me.

I’m not stupid. “Is it me? Did I do
something wrong and upset you? The thing
is I don’t want to make you sad in your
house, if I did something wrong just tell me
so that I can apologize. You’ve been kind to
me, you helped me and Nzuzo.”

“So it was just help Nondu?” he asks.

So it’s me he’s angry at?

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You’re packing your bags, you’re happy.

At times I just feel insignificant in your life,

like you don't see my efforts nor feel my presence," he says.

"That's not true, I was just excited about going home." Now I feel bad for being happy about my mother's call and going back home. Isn't that crazy?

"Because what we have still has no name and it's easy to let go of?" he asks.

I wasn't expecting this when I came here, I feel bombarded with heavy questions.

"I'm sorry I'm hurt," he says.

Our eyes lock, there's no usual spark, just heavy darkness and grief in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, I was just excited about my mom's call," I say.

“I don’t have a mom to call me, maybe I’m selfish. You should be happy about it, she’s your mom, you love being around her more, you’ve known her longer.” Jealousy reeks from his statement.

Phewww! I look around, my eyes land on the bottle of whisky placed on the floor next to the bed corner. Are you kidding me?

“Are you drinking here, at this hour?” I’m shocked.

“I didn’t drink,” he says, looking a bit embarrassed.

“Why is this here then?”

“Just,” he shrugs.

“What do you mean just? You said you don’t have an alcohol problem. I’m so disappointed,” I say shaking my head.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, nkosazane yakoNjomane. My life hasn’t been rosy, sometimes I can’t handle it, I hold on to whatever that helps me numb the pain, which is never you by the way. So excuse me if I drink, these aren’t normal hours for me, I was once 10 years old holding not the bottle of alcohol, but my mother’s dead body in the bedroom, during these hours. I was once punched and kicked to the point of temporary eyesight lost , during these hours. I was once tied to the bed and had my stomach cut open with a knife, during these hours. I was once sitting outside the door in the cold, during these hours. I once

crawled in the dark and held a machete...”

He stops, he's breathing heavily, popping his finger joints like he intends to break them.

I keep quiet, I'm dumb-struck, I can't even move my hands. Did he kill his mother with a machete? It's scary that I don't care if he did.

He sniffs back, “I'm sorry I'm not what you want.”

“I didn't say that Nkalipho,” my voice breaks, tears are close.

“I've been on anti-depressants, I went for counseling, I attended church, I got cleansed, I experienced the love of a parent. But some scars are just way too deep, it's easy to tell your mind what it

shouldn't think of, counseling did that for me, I don't think a lot, I let things go. But some things stay in your conscience, you can never heal. There's no counseling for unembeza. Maybe God adds his punishment as well." He wipes his face and lies back on the pillow.

I know he hates the darkness, but today I'm here, I switch off the light and get in bed. He's lying on his back, I lie on my stomach on top of him.

It takes a minute for him to embrace me, he pulls up the covers and holds me tighter.

"Thanks for sharing that with me. Just know that I'm not judging you, I do want you to be a better person, to heal and be able to sleep at night. You are a good man,

I'm glad you survived because I got to meet you, you've changed a lot in me over a month."

He doesn't respond vocally, he hears me though, his hand is running over my back. Maybe we'll just sleep like this, I got him for life. Fuck his mother!

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I open my eyes, it's still dark outside. I have someone behind me, very close and touchy. Oh yeah, I'm sleeping on a man's bed. I need to pee and come back for another short sleep. I don't even know what time it is.

“Nondu,” he’s pulling me from getting out of bed.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” I say.

“We’ll go together,” he says.

Does that even make sense? We are not pee-twins.

He’s pulling me back, he means business. Before I know it he’s pulling down my pyjama shorts. “Nkalipho let me go to the bathroom and...”

I feel a hard rod sliding between my buttocks. Hell naaaw!

“Nkalipho!” I let out half a scream.

“Relax,” he says with a low chuckle. His hand comes to my mound and caresses my

pleasure-button. This is risky, I'm pressed with pee.

"Let me go and pee first," this time I fight his strong hands off.

I escape and dash to the bathroom. I'm only going to take a minute, nobody has ever died from being horny, men like acting special.

I sit on the toilet and release the pee.

Footsteps!

Are you kidding me?

He's naked, his dick is hard and pointing at me.

I'm so uncomfortable now, I'm trying to hold my pee so that it doesn't sound like

Dineo floods. He stands next to me, what's wrong with him?

I roll the toilet paper to wipe myself and do it with no comfort at all.

He helps me up and closes the toilet lid.

Then he grabs my waist and kisses my neck. I'm trying to push him off, but the more I do the harder he comes back.

"Let's go to the bedroom," I say.

He stops, breathing heavily.

I get a chance and walk away fast.

He follows me, I get in bed and pull up the covers.

"Come closer," he says pulling me to his chest.

He wants to fuck, he's like a hungry beast seeing a fat buck.

"I want to drink water first," I say.

"Come on Nondu," he pulls my leg over his hip and rubs the side of his hand between my folds. No, I really need water, the bottle is just on the other side of the room.

He inhales sharply as I crawl out of his arms yet again.

I open the bottle of water and drink, patiently. We don't want me to choke now, do we?

He's lying there staring at me, probably counting every second.

Oh, the bottle is empty now. I need to get it to the bin in the bathroom.

I control myself and not laugh at the idea of him in bed with his horny dick. I'm here in the bathroom looking at myself in the mirror, that's what beautiful girls do, we can't get enough of ourselves. When I think he's suffered enough I make my way back to the bedroom. Hands just grab me outside the bathroom door.

"Nkalipho!" I got a little fright. Why is he hiding by the door now?

"Hellooo," he's holding me by waist, so close and tight.

"Let's go to bed," I say.

He says nothing, he puts his knee between my legs and pushes the head of his dick

over my clit. He can't be serious, the tiles are freakin' cold, I have no shoes on.

“Nkalipho don't you dare!” I threaten.

He pushes me up the wall with my legs and presses me against it. He slides in without much of a romance, I don't know how I got wet enough to accommodate him. He's just sliding in, pushing every inch of himself inside me.

I'm unable to move, I'm pressed against the cold wall.

He's gentle with the first few strokes, for a moment there I'm thinking we are making love. But no, we are fucking. He's slamming inside me, my inner thighs are aching but my cherry is coughing out juices and

trembling in response to the amount of pleasure I'm receiving.

I'm crying now, but tears aren't coming out, it's fake but sounds very real.

He puts me down and pulls me to the bed. I lie on my back and open my legs. He's just standing next to me, I'm obeying rules that weren't even laid.

He comes closer, his waist is close enough for his dick to be in contact with my mound. But he doesn't move it, he just looks at me.

"Ifake la oyifuna khona," he says. (put it where you want it)

Deep breath! I pull it down to my opening, he helps me by pushing his waist to the

direction of my hand. I put it all in, but he doesn't do anything. This is so unfair, I want to be a dead chicken, only providing slutty screams and getting orgasms.

“Uyazinwaya?” (Are you rubbing yourself)

That’s an insult to my good moves. So I stop, he must take over since he knows how to do it the best.

But, he pulls his dick out instead.

“Nkalipho!” I’m shocked by the level of gender-based violence.

He lies next to me and buries his face on my shoulder. Seriously? I push his face and give him a cold glare. Does he want me to beg? Hhayi-bo men of the last days!

I sit on top of him, slowly insert myself and bounce on him. I don’t need to shake in a

particular rhythm and impress him, my goal is to get the pleasure I need and cum.

I'm closer, I just need to...oh fuck yes! I'm all wet, my folds are trembling, there's a wave riding from my toes up.

I lie flat on his chest, I need a little nap.

Flip! I'm at the bottom again.

He pulls my legs to either sides of his waist and pounds inside me. He's ripping me apart, my voice is no longer coming out, I have my nails dug into his back.

“Vula ngiku...aaah...ahhh...shit!” He's pushed my legs up against my ears. If I don't fake a cry now he will break my legs.

“Nkalipho!” I start crying.

“I’m almost there, bekezela kancane.” He doesn’t release my legs, he repositions himself and goes even deeper with his strokes. The harder he goes, the closer I think he gets to his end. But another five minutes pass, he hasn’t changed his pace, I really can’t handle it now.

“You’re hurting me Nkalipho,” I tell him.

“I’m sorry mama,” he opens his eyes and looks at me. He’s sweating a storm, his eyes are looking at two different directions; it’s the worst I’ve ever seen. His mouth is loosely open, he looks so ugly. It’s so childish that I’m tempted to laugh.

“When are you finishing kanti?” I’ve had my orgasms, I don’t mind ending this party, I’m getting dry by the way- I’m not

comfortable in this position. I don't know if his ex-girlfriends were ballerina dancers, but I'm not.

“Manje baby,” he’s picking up more pace. Is he a sex athlete?

I try to push my leg down, he presses me harder and gives me long, deep strokes. I didn't mean to, but my teeth have sunk on his flesh, on the shoulder. He lets go of my legs, lies heavily on my chest and whispers out of breath, “Ngiyakuthanda mfethu.”

Out of guilt, for biting his shoulder and for not being able to tell him that I love him back, I kiss him on the cheek. He rolls to the side and lies on his back. A minute later he's snoring loudly.

This snore, phewww! I thought nothing could be a turn-off about him.

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I get Nzuzo ready for school and bring his bags to the lounge. I've taken a bath too, now I need to get into my work uniform and pack my toiletries. Nkalipho has woken up as well, he's taking a shower. It's very old school of me to do this, but I have way too many thoughts, telling him in person will be uncomfortable. I've also taken my sweet time, hey.

Yes, I write him a short letter admitting my feelings. I sneak it under the pillow, he will only see it when he comes back from work;

{I'm not sorry I made you wait because you called yourself a tireless chaser, and me a wounded deer. Of which I am, that's why I'm going to ask you not to break my heart, I've been wounded and left with scars before. Just so you know, you've had my heart for quite a while now. I love you too Mnguni.

So deeply in love with you.

Your official snqandamathe,

Nondumezulu}

He walks out of the bedroom and takes our bags to the car. We have to pass by his father's house and say goodbye to Sphiwe. It's been good, I'm grateful for everything

they did for me, especially Masentle babysitting while I was having romantic dinners and attending non-existent funerals.

“I hope I’m not forgetting anything,” I say when he comes back for the last bag.

“You’re talking as if this is a foreign country that you’re never coming back to. You’re still going to be here a lot,” he says.

“You’re very opinionated,” I state sarcastically.

We are walking out, I’m taking memories with me; good and bad. I’m looking forward to my mother’s explanation and just seeing her.

Nzuzo sits at the back with Nkalipho’s tablet playing CandyCrush.

He's not starting the car, does he want me to be late? He takes something out of his pocket, my heart drops instantly when I see what it is. He glances at me and smiles, "Are you going to read it for me?" he asks. "No," I'm embarrassed.

It was under his pillow, the bed was already made, I thought he'd see it later.

"You have a bad hand-writing, I can't read what's written here." He's lying, I wrote everything clearly. He just wants to make me uncomfortable.

"Then I will send you a text," I say.

"I can get someone else to read it for me, uMnguni."

Oh hell, no! I'm not going to doubt this, I've seen how close and open this family is.

"Fuck you, okay?" I grab the letter from his hands.

He chuckles and folds his arms and looks at me attentively.

Did I really write all this? There's no way I'm going to read and call myself a wounded deer.

"I love you," I tell him.

The amazement in his eyes!

"So you're finally done thinking?"

"Yes," I look away. Gosh, why am I shy?

"My official snqandamathe," he says.

I punch his arm, "You said you couldn't read it."

He laughs and pulls my face for a kiss.

Yeah, it's official, I'm somebody's son's girlfriend.

“Not in the mouth Lume,” the little voice yells.

Damn! I'm only getting a kiss on the cheek after penning down such a long, poetic love confession. Fuck the kids, man.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 21

SALO MHLONGO

Dad called me back after a moment, he was calmer, he said he'll be here to see me tomorrow. Maybe I'm too sensitive these days, I've been constantly crying since that first call where he just shouted at me. So what if I went home against his word? I'm my own human, I had every right to go and see my mother. I needed him to be sympathetic and hurt that his daughter had a car accident. My mother has already showed no concern, he was my last hope.

A hand touches my arm, I'm pretending to fall asleep but he's still sitting here.

"Baby don't let this gets to you." It's so easy for him to say this, he's got loving parents, no blood-sucking siblings who demand iPhones and never say 'thank you.'

“Your parents love you, it's easy for you to talk,” I say angrily.

He exhales softly and holds my hand tightly. I turn my head and look at him.

He’s got that calming look on his face telling me everything will be okay.

“This is between them, marriage isn’t always rosy, they’re going through a phase.

Why would they give birth to such a beautiful girl and then hate her? Is it even possible to hate you?” He lifts his hand and brushes my cheek.

I’m smiling. “Are you going to sit here all day?”

“Now you’re chasing me out? I haven’t slept alone in weeks, it’s kind of hard with you being here,” he says.

My poor babydaddy!

“Why don’t you go home?” I ask. I’ve noticed that he’s a bit of a rebel. Not that I didn’t expect it, this man had three earrings when I met him, and coming from the family he’s told me about, it’s questionable that he has tattoos.

“I don’t like being in my parents’ space, I want them to have sex in peace,” he says.

My jaws are on the floor. I know my parents probably still make love, they’re not that old, but I’d never let such thoughts cross my mind. Yiks!

“You have a dirty mind, you need to pray,” I say.

He laughs, “Praying is another reason why I don’t like going home. We do that every second, it’s tiring.”

“Demonic child!”

I’m feeling a lot better. I’m glad he’s the person that he is, I fall in love with him every day. I don’t know how I’m going to get to work after I get out of here. I’m working backwards instead of forward, now I have no car. But I’m happy that my little family here is okay.

“Zothani,” I say.

He kisses the back of my hand and lifts his eyes to me.

“If the baby didn’t survive, would have our relationship survived?” I don’t know where this is coming from, I’m just wondering

since our relationship was based on our common goals more than love. Not that we don't love each other, I just feel like we love having a baby with each other more.

"I don't like that question. But nothing would've stopped us from continuing with our relationship, we are still going to have more babies, ipipi lami liyasebenza mos," he says.

"Really now?" I roll my eyes.

"You wouldn't be craving for mutton pies if my dick didn't work. And please stop rolling your eyes, I'm older than you."

Hhayi bo!

"Stop talking about dicks with a minor then," I say.

“A minor who’s a master of woman on top?”

“Leave my hospital!” I pinch his arm.

He laughs and stands up stretching his arms. “I will be back, you’re not getting rid of me. Can I have your mother’s number before I go?”

“Why?” I raise my eyebrows.

“She’s the grandmother of my child.”

I’m sure that’s not why he wants it, she’s been the grandmother of his child since we found out that I’m pregnant but he’s never needed her contact details. I’m hesitant but I know he won’t just drop it, so I end up giving him my mother’s number.

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

She didn't expect her husband to be back today. He should be with the Nkosis watching every move, what a slow man! What if they do something on the grave after his departure to strike back to whoever had a hand in Thembelihle's death. Obviously that 'whoever' would be her; she's not ready to die, she's not even the dying type to begin with.

She can't even welcome him warmly, she's standing at the door with her arms folded and face bored.

Babo walks in without sharing much of an eye contact. Not even a hug. Really?

“I’m not a statue Njomane, why are you not greeting me?” She follows behind him.

He doesn’t respond, he goes to the bottle of water on the counter and opens it. He lifts it to his mouth but stops half way.

“There’s nothing in this water, right?” he asks her.

“What do you mean? Water has its vitamins.”

“Minerals you mean, I’m asking if you didn’t put anything inside the bottle,” he says.

Now she gets it; he’s accusing her of something.

“I’m not a witch Njomane,” she snaps angrily.

“Then what do you call what you did to my daughter? I can’t believe you would go that far with your blood Busisekile,” this is why he’s back and angry.

“You give me too much credit. How did I cause a car accident? And why would I want to damage my daughter’s car when she’s worked so hard for everything she has?” She’s convincing, but Babo just knows her too well to believe this face.

“You called her to come home and pretended to be suicidal. What did you want to do to her? Brush her stomach and feed her cravings? Well, that doesn’t sound like the witch I married,” he’s spitting fire.

Busisekile breaks into a fit of laughter. A witch? Her? No, this man has allowed the act they put for the Nkosis to get into his head. He's now thinking he's some savior or God's long-distant cousin.

"I was trying to protect our younger kids. She was already talking about changes and compromises, she won't buy Sbonga a mere new phone. What do you think is going to happen once that baby is born?"

"When is Sbonga coming home?" – Babo.

She blinks rapidly, thrown back by the question. Where did that come from?

"I don't know, what does that have anything to do with what we are talking about?"

“You’ve been keeping my kids away from me. I’m tired of hearing about your brother wanting them to visit, they’re my kids, not his.” He came back recharged from that funeral, this is not the energy Busisekile needs.

“We have to protect our family Njomane. Killing a grandchild you haven’t even met shouldn’t be that hard, you killed your owner brother, someone you shared womb with,” she says.

“I didn’t kill my brother,” his voice is low. He’s right where she wanted him, his tail is back between his legs. Does he need to be reminded that he killed Thembelihle as well? It’s his hand that fed, she only cooked, he mustn’t act holy now.

“MaKhumalo that’s our daughter, she’s done so much for us already, let her have a baby,” he’s begging.

“No, that’s final. Are you hungry?”

He shakes his head. He will suit himself, her phone is ringing.

She takes it out of her bra and looks at the number with her eyes squinted. She doesn’t recognize this number, but she answers.

“Hello Ma, you’re speaking to Zothani Zungu, the father of your daughter’s unborn baby,” the caller says.

The devil really tests you in different forms and shapes! Now the devil has a name; Zothani Zungu .

“Oh hello weZothani Zungu,” she says.

Babo snaps his brows, he knows that name.

“Your daughter is in hospital Ma, she’s already dealing with a lot, I just want to ask that you show a little sympathy,” the Zothani thing says.

Imihlola yamaNtungwa le!

“Why don’t you tell me exactly how high I must jump? I will do just that,” she says.

“Ma, I’m not fighting, I respect you. I’m just worried because right now she thinks nobody cares about her well-being, you only cared about the car,” it says.

“That’s what she said?” She casts her gaze to Babo. He's listening to the phone call attentively.

“She was crying, I think hormones are also playing a part,” it says.

“Oh shame, thank you for letting me know my boy, me and her father will be there tomorrow morning,” she says.

Babo frowns.

“Yes my boy...no worries, have a good night,” she’s smiling as the call ends. Babo is puzzled, she’s up to something again.

“This is our last chance,” she says.

“To do what?” – Babo.

“Don’t bore me wena Jesu omncane.

Come, I will give you a foot massage and check how Njomane has been down there.”

She snatches his arm and pulls him towards their lounge.

He should be happy, moments like this make being with her bearable, but there’s a lot that can’t be ignored in this house. He

needs to think about tomorrow; how is he going to save his daughter's baby?

While she gathers her foot massage tools, Babo asks for a quick bathroom break. He needs to talk to that boy, he's the only person who can protect his daughter right now. Not even once has he ever thought he'd ask for a boy sleeping with his daughter for help.

He calls Salo, he's feeling guilty after hearing that she was crying and feeling like she's not loved. He loves his children, so much that he'd do everything for them. He's done a lot of things he's not proud of for the sake of his family. His heart is racing, Salo is taking her time answering.

“Baba,” she finally answers.

“Hey, how are you doing?”

“I was about to fall asleep, I’m getting there baba.”

Deep breath! “I need that boy’s number, now.”

“Why?” She’s panicking, it’s not normal for a father to just want their child’s boyfriend’s number. “Baba please don’t shout at him, he wants to come and pay for the damages and...”

“I just want to talk to him Salabenzeni, man to man," he says.

“Okay, I will send it,” she’s not comfortable with this but she has no choice .

Babo waits for a minute, then his phone beeps, she's sent it.

He checks the coast before making another phone call.

It rings a few times before Zothani answers.

"This is Salabenzi's father," Babo says.

"Oh, baba how are you?" He sounds scared more than confused.

"Siyancenga, akufani. Are you with Salabenzi?"

"No, I'm going to see her in the morning.

But I was there two hours ago, she was fine, she's recovering well," Zothani says.

"I need you to do something for me and keep it between the two of us."

“Okay baba, anything,” he says, he’s still desperate for acceptance.

“First thing you must know that Salabenzi was not meant to be pregnant. Her mother...I mean we didn’t want that for her. I know she thinks everyone is happy, especially her mother, but that's not the case. And it’s dangerous for the baby because anything can happen.”

“Whoah, what do you mean anything can happen to my baby?” Zothani asks, his tone dropping a ton of respect. When it comes to his munchkin he doesn’t play.

“I mean just that, anything can happen because her mother is not happy. I need you to keep a close eye on her, don’t let her eat anything we bring tomorrow during our

visit, don't let her wear any clothes or use any item brought for her. It's for the best interest of the baby," Babo says.

"You're confusing me Mhlongo. You're making me question your innocence with your wife. I've been pushing aside my feelings regarding the car drama and convincing her that you both love her. Now I don't know what to think, please be straight with me. Does your wife want my baby dead?"

"Your puzzle-solving skills are not going to protect..." There are footsteps coming towards the bathroom door. Babo raises his voice; "AmaZulu FC need a new coach Shange, those boys are sleeping nowadays. Do they even train?"

“What???” – Zothani.

“That boy reminds me of Siyabonga Nomvete, he’s going far I’m telling you. Once the European teams notice him they won’t waste any time, they will snatch him.”

“Bab’ Mhlongo?” Zothani on the other side, he’s confused as a fuck.

Busisekile is leaning by the bathroom door, impatiently looking at her husband who’s still discussing soccer instead of coming to “Busisekile spa and massage treatment”.

“You can talk to Shange tomorrow,” she snorts angrily.

“Umfazi akasafuni, we will talk tomorrow Shange,” Babo says.

Only then it clicks to Zothani. “Kulungile Delani, we will talk tomorrow.”

Babo almost drops his phone. So Salabenzi wasn't only opening her legs for this boy, she was also telling him her father's birth name, children are so disrespectful these days!

Busisekile pulls him out of the bathroom, she's a loving warm wife today. There's a basin of water placed on the carpet by the couch. She sprinkled bathsalt inside, this person is coming from the slut's funeral, God knows ubefebe he stepped on there at the Nkosis.

“I thought I was getting a foot massage,” Babo says, taking a seat.

“I’m massaging you and removing udaka lobufebe from your feet.” She kneels in front of him and takes off his shoes and socks. The water is a bit too hot but he’s a man, he won’t cry. He dips his feet in the water and grunts to the heat.

“Are you boiling my feet?” he asks.

Busisekile bursts into laughter, “Njomane why are you such a coward? This water is warm, I can bath a newborn baby here.”

She gently washes his feet and dries them and takes away the water. She comes back and opens the massage cream and rubs it on top of his feet.

“Look how good I take care of you.

Ufebelani nje kodwa Njomane?”

He drops his eyes in shame. Yes, sometimes she makes bad decisions but she's not a bad wife, she doesn't deserve all the things he's done to her- breaking his vows.

“What was it with Thembelihle anyway?”

Her hands are soft, softer than her heart and bigger than her conscience. She's massaging his feet good, all the fatigue he's had over a couple of days slowly fades off.

“I was just being a man, ungrateful and always looking where I shouldn't have,” he says. It's just a justification of his actions. It's every man's response to why they cheated, not the real reason.

“You met her shortly after your sister's death, don't you think maybe it's that she

was reminding you of her?” She’s calm, rolling her hands on his heel and rubbing his toes, one at a time.

“Thembelihle is nothing like Smangele, maybe they do share similar traits here and there, but nothing much,” he’s talking about her in present, like she’s not dead. Very strange and confusing!

“What are those traits? I never got to meet your sister, maybe I can get a picture by looking at Thembelihle,” she says, she’s playing to the present talking as well .

“She’s feisty and outspoken, just like Smangele was. She’s brave, you know. Thembelihle goes after what she wants, she doesn’t care what people say,” – Babo.

“True, even people’s husbands,” Busisekile interjects. He’s holding her on a high pedestal, it’s so annoying. But she’s still calm, she has to tread carefully.

“I was talking about life generally,” Babo says, clearing his throat.

“If she always gets what she wants, why doesn’t she have kids? Doesn’t the fighter want kids?” Busisekile asks sarcastically.

“That’s a medical condition...I mean, it was a medical condition,” Babo says.

“Is it no longer a medical condition yini baba?” – Busisekile.

“It is,” he says.

Something doesn't add up here, but she won't push just yet, whatever it is

Busisekile can't be played, Njomane knows better than that.

Well, she's done with his feet.

She stands, leans over and kisses her husband's lips. "How has Njomane been?"

"He was good, were you worried about him?" He's smiling, staring up at her.

"How could I not worry? Many women want to take care of him for me." Women don't forgive cheating, do they? He's chucking with embarrassment.

"That's not true, Njomane has been missing his only Tofolux, you." He's lifting her dress up, touching her butt over the petticoat and staring at her eyes.

Her stare is growing softer, here is the affectionate wife he married. Their lips connect, they're kissing, making cat-calling noises. He drops his trouser and takes out his erect shaft, Busisekile directly positions herself around his waist until he's inserted inside her. They're on the couch, moving side to side, moaning to the sexual pleasure from their connected private parts.

Babo's phone rings, they ignore it and continue with their love-making. Both of them are into this, their emotions are there and raw. He's enjoying his wife, whoever it is can wait.

They're on it for quite a while, then he feels her thighs getting wet and her groaning

deeper. He pushes to the soft spot that always takes him to the cloud of joy.

“Oh MaKhumalo!” he groans, spilling his seeds inside her.

He grabs her butt tightly and keeps his shaft deeply buried inside her until he’s spilled everything, then he pulls out.

“That was good, I have missed you,” he says.

Busisekile blushes, “I missed you too Njomane.”

They kiss for a moment, then he picks his trouser and checks who this annoying caller is.

Goddamn, this boy. Is he stupid?

He has to answer, otherwise his wife will suspect something.

“Shange, is everything alright?” His breath is held in his chest.

“Delani are you able to talk?” – Zothani.

He’s going to pay twice for the damages for this.

“No, I’m with my wife,” he says.

Busisekile is staring at him. First thing she's going to do tomorrow morning is call Shange and enquire about these late phone calls because they're new.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 22

SALO MHLONGO

My parents are coming to see me today. I was angry at them for showing little to no care about what happened to me, but now I'm starting to think maybe Zothani was right, I was overreacting. It makes sense that my mother cried for the car after I told her me and the baby were fine, I mean she knows how hard I worked to be able to have a car. It broke her heart, not that she didn't care that me and baby survived. I'm still going to get out of here and face

reality- going back to the world of being a passenger.

I took a bath before everyone and came back and ate my breakfast without a fuss.

I'm in a good mood, I'm chatting to the nurses and responding to my colleagues who keep asking how I am via Whatsapp. I was angry at them for not physically coming and see me, but now I don't care, nobody owes me anything.

I'm all glammed up waiting for my mom and dad, I'm not expecting anyone else, especially not Nkatha Zungu. He's got his own practice and patients who need his attention, why is here with those files like he's on duty?

Oh, he's with Zothani. I thought this one had somewhere to be this morning, there's match he's hosting for the Under-16 groups in the district. In a few months they're starting with the tournaments, that's where he gets to see the potential upcoming players. He's passionate about his job, always going an extra mile, probably to prove his parents wrong and making sure that he's not a poor version of his brother. Him being here means that he canceled or postponed, which makes me wonder what the big deal is because he was here last night and he will be here late today.

Maybe Nkatha is an expert of pregnant car-accident survivors and he's here to give his advice. He stands next to the bed. Can't even afford a smile for a car-accident

survivor, just a piercing stare and a little frown. His brother stands next to him, staring at me with bloodshot eyes. It doesn't look like he slept at all.

“Is everything okay?” I'm now panicking, because why on earth are they standing here and staring at me.

“Yeah, everything is okay. We are just shocked that you are here, supposedly fighting for your life, with 20 layers of make-up on your face and a ponytail?” Zothani says.

“Dude, get a life!” I'm cracking up and hurting my ribs. They're such idiots, so this is all about make-up, have they never seen a slaying patient before?

Nkatha chuckles a bit, shaking his head.

“You’re such an interesting character. This man is crying for you and you’re here with your Fenty Beauty products making being hospitalized look easy.”

I definitely didn’t expect him to know about make-up brands. He didn’t just wake up and knew this, he must’ve been around a lot of women. All along I thought Zothani was the player of the family.

“I’m waiting for my parents, I don’t want them to get here and think I’m dying,” I tell them.

There’s a moment there, I don’t what they’re exchanging with those looks. Then my doctor enters, her eyes lights up when she sees the company that I have. They

exchange greetings, she briefs them about my progress and the baby's condition, which is excellent.

“My brother raised a few concerns with me, but we all know that prenatal testing for neurodevelopmental disorders have enormous ethical implications. My family has a history of PDD-Not Otherwise Specified. I have it, so does my father. We didn't meet the full criteria to be diagnosed with autism; my father was too old when he got diagnosed and I only showed traits when I was older,” Nkatha says.

The doctor is jotting down as he speaks. I think for a second my heart stopped, I remember him asking why I never looked into Zothani's genetic history instead of

just looking at his financial abilities, which offended me. But now I'm panicking listening to this, I heard the word 'autism' and my mind went straight to the struggles Nondu has had with Nzuzo.

“Does it mean my baby will have autism?”

I ask.

“No baby, we are just trying to figure out if there's any chance,” – Zothani.

Wow, so he expects me to chill.

“You could've told me this, why am I only hearing about it now?” I grab a towel next to me and wipe the stupid lipstick. Nothing would've changed even if I knew about this before getting pregnant, I would've still wanted his baby, I just don't understand why they're bringing this here and now.

“We cannot tell now, as you know, but for now everything looks normal. The scare we had when she came in was that we suspect Type B nuchal cords, but we can only be sure after 20 weeks,” the hospital doctor says.

I feel like my pregnancy is getting complicated with a minute.

“What is that?” I ask. Shockingly, I’m the only one panicking about all of this. Did Zothani knew about it all this time and kept it from me?

“Locked cords, which results into your baby being born with the umbilical cord wrapped around the neck. It’s nothing to worry about, either way chances of survival are higher than fatality,” she says.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” I look at Nkatha. Right now I cannot ask for anything more than having a boyfriend’s brother who’s in the medicine field. He needs to come up with a solution ASAP.

“What’s next?”

“You will be under the care of my friend who’s an obstetrician after you get out of here, for now you’re listening to the nurses and your doctor here.” She’s blushing, Jesus Christ! I turn to look at Zothani,

“Why are you not scared?”

“I am,” he says and grabs my hand with a deep exhalation.

“Don’t worry, focus on recovering for now and feeding your little one,” my doctor says.

“Speaking of that, I have talked to the hospital regarding what you eat and drink,” Nkatha says.

I frown and look at Zothani. I’m confused here.

“I have given Zothani clear instructions on what he should bring you to eat, the hospital will also comply with them, for the best interest of the baby and your health as a mother. I don’t expect you to eat anything that’s not from this hospital or brought by Zothani, okay?” He’s a dictator, that’s probably why we didn’t have a great start.

“Okay,” I nod, only because he said it’s for the best interest of the baby. Otherwise, I

didn't like his tone, he's too bold- or should I just say arrogant.

Wait...

“Are mutton pies canceled?” I ask.

Zothani laughs. Yeah, it's Comedy Central to him, all of us.

“The ones from random shops are canceled, Zothani will make sure you get the right ones, don't worry I'm not putting you in jail. I just want you to have the safest pregnancy possible,” he says.

“Thank you, that's a relief.”

He looks at the doctor, “Thanks for allowing me to be here, I will leave you to your job.”

“You’re welcome Dr Manzini,” this doctor has never smiled so wide before.

Nkatha bids us goodbye and leaves.

I get my morning check-ups done and have my medication.

When the doctor leaves it’s me and Zothani.

Am I angry at him? Maybe.

“You didn’t think it was important to tell me that your family has a genetic history of autism?” I ask.

“I never witnessed it, Nkatha knows about it because he researched about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Him and my father had fewer symptoms, not the whole autism thing. It has never

been something I take serious as them sucking in football.” He’s still not taking it seriously, even when our baby may be born with it.

“I feel like you’re keeping important things from me. Is there anything else that I don’t know about?” I ask.

“I had a wet dream last night.”

I push his stupid hand off me, he’s laughing.

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Finally my parents are here. My dad looks like my dad. He’s wearing his formal white shirt, tucked into his black pants- mom’s

instructions. Thank God they're still married.

“What kind of hospital is this?” mom asks.

“Whatever they did, I apologize for them.”

She drops the shopping bag and lunchbox on the bedside cabinet and asks if she can hug me. I'm still in pain but a hug from my mother is what I need.

“Are they feeding you horrible hospital food here?” She's already opening the lunchbox with home-cooked food. Nkatha wouldn't approve of this.

“I can't eat anything other than what the hospital was instructed to give me,” I tell her.

She stops and frowns. “Instructed by who? Nobody can instruct me not to feed my child. I woke up by dawn to cook for you.”

This is going to be hard.

“There could be some complications with my pregnancy. The uncle of this baby is a doctor, it’s him who made those instructions,” I tell her.

“Oh, so I can’t give you food because I’m not a doctor, I don’t wear white coats and wear those earphone-things?” She’s hurt, I should’ve known this would happen.

Dad clears his throat, “Let’s respect the doctors, they know what they’re doing.”

“And I don’t know what I’m doing?” Here we go.

“Without a doubt, you know very well what you’re doing.”

They’re glaring at each other, so much for my imaginary happy family. My dad is the first to drop his eyes.

“Ma, you will have a whole life to feed me after I give birth. There’s no big deal, even though I miss your stew,” I say.

“She’s right, you can cook for her after she’s given birth,” – dad.

“Sbonga video-called me 15 minutes ago, she said she’s going to see malume this coming weekend.” I expect to see some relief on their faces. Sbonga and I haven’t been getting along a lot lately, the iPhone issue made things worse, so us getting along for one day should move something

in their hearts. But neither one of them looks pleased, especially my dad.

“I don’t know anything about this,” he says.

“We’ll talk about...” Mom doesn’t finish, he takes out his phone and dials a number. He’s calling Sbonga. Did I put someone in trouble?

“Sbongokuhle this is your father...Friday I will fetch you and your brother from school, you need to come home and get impepho. It’s been a long time, your forefathers need to see you...I miss you too my child...”

My mom is giving me a look, I’m not sure what I did wrong. Sbonga and Sekhona haven’t been home in some time now,

they're slowly drifting to our mother's side of the family, which is both good and bad. I mean, they need to have a relationship with their parents, especially Sekhona since he's a boy child.

"There was no need for that," my mom snorts angrily. "You're doing what umkhwenyana asked us not to do, you're here, show our daughter your love and stop focusing on your phone."

Umkhwenyana? Lol.

"So he called you?" I ask.

"Yes, what a respectful young man!" mom sings praises.

"Young?" – dad.

He's so shady.

Mom's eyes widen, "What do you mean?"

"He's your brother's age," he says.

That's a pure lie. My uncle was born in September, he's 2 months and 15 days older than Zothani.

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AUNT TEEKAY

She's always thought she was strong, that could face and conquer anything. Not even once had she ever thought she'd be kept in a nyanga's house because of another woman. She's not scared of Busisekile, or any other woman for that matter. After

Magagula treated her Delani and her sister agreed that it would be better if she lies low, than Delani would work on doing right by the ancestors; placing them in their right places and giving them back their powers. He did a lot, they're probably angry, he might gets punished for his wrongdoings. But he didn't mind taking the risk because at the end he knew he'd get something his heart always wanted. Yes, Thembelihle. She made a promise that if he helps MaNkosi she'd become his second wife. That's why he's out there betraying his wife, spilling their secrets and planning to go to Kwamhlabuyalingana with MaNkosi to get assistance. He stands to gain something of great value; a second wife.

Khulekani walks in with two bowls of food. It's been him since MaNkosi and Delani left, he was assigned by the 96 year old Magagula to come and take care of her. He's the fourth son of the nyanga, most of his siblings followed on their father's footsteps. It's easy to say every Magagula has a special spiritual gift, except him. Maybe that's why he's the black sheep of the family, nobody can relate to him. Ever since he lost his job and came back home with his bank account empty and dry, he's been getting these duties that sometimes don't even make sense. Like why is he here looking after a grown-ass woman? She's healthy, ungrateful and wet-mouthed, and he has to come here three times a day to make sure she's okay.

“I have your lunch and dinner,” he tells her as he places both bowls on the table.

“And dinner? Is it not going to get cold? I have no microwave here.” Yeah, she’s always complaining about something. How she’s going to survive polygamy is really a mystery.

“I don’t know,” he’s not a man of too many words.

“Have they called today?” she asks. She doesn’t have her phone, MaNkosi left with it, so she relies on Khulekani for their messages.

“No,” Khulekani says.

She raises her eyebrows, “Why is Delani not calling? I’m here because of him and his wife. He needs to act fast before I go

there and make things happen myself. I'm not scared of anyone."

He's silent, just leaning by the wall and looking at her. Oh, she's handwashing clothes again. He's done telling her that there's a washing machine he can take her clothes to. If she wants to be a superwoman so be it.

"If witchdoctors didn't exist there wouldn't be any witchcraft," she's rolling her fists on the dress she's washing with frustration.

It's a provocation since his own father and two brothers are traditional doctors.

She looks up when she gets no engagement from him. He's always looking at her like he's planning her murder.

“You can leave, I don’t need a babysitter,” she says.

“I also don’t need a radio, but I’m here because I respect my father and your husband.”

“My what?” She raises her eyebrow.

“Whatever you call him. So I have to sit here and babysit you and put up with your crazy moods for hours,” he says.

“I’m not going to argue with a kid,” she stands up and dries her hands on her skirt and takes her food. It was prepared by him, he’s kind of holding his breath right now hoping he didn’t put too much oil or salt in the chicken. He’s 37 by the way, but when you’re unemployed nobody takes your age

seriously, so he's not even going to argue her calling him a kid.

“Which wife cooked today?” she asks.

“I cooked,” he says.

“What?” She almost chokes. He's a Zulu man, dark to the bone with iziphandla around his wrists and that aura of being a nyanga's son. Why on earth would he cook creamy pasta? How does he even know it?

He raises his eyebrow; what's so shocking about him cooking?

“You're not serious, are you?” – Aunt Teekay.

“I cooked. Is there anything wrong with the food?”

“No, it’s delicious! I’m just surprised you know how to cook.”

“Oh,” that’s disappointing to hear.

“Don’t you have a wife? Or wives,” she rolls her eyes.

Deep breath Khulekani!

“No,” he says.

“Why? Your whole family is witchdoctors, you can get any woman that you want and put a spell on her family so that you don’t pay lobola,” she’s at it again, throwing jabs at his family. The same family that treated her and took her in to protect her from her boyfriend’s wife.

“Don’t you want to sit and think and not open your mouth sometimes?” he asks, he’s tired of listening to her.

“No, not really, maybe that’s why my niece hates me,” she says.

“She’s me, I’m her,” he mutters.

She tilts her head to the side, “Huh?”

“I didn’t say anything,” he shrugs.

“Ok. So how come you don’t have a spiritual gift?”

“How come you don’t have a husband of your own and going after people’s husbands?”

“I can’t have kids, so I don’t need a husband. What’s your reason?”

He wasn’t expecting that, she just put it out there with no emotion whatsoever. She’s feisty, stubborn as hell, and speaks way too much for his liking. But maybe there’s more

than what she gives to the surface. People don't just wake up and decide to be strong, circumstances force them to be.

“I cannot say why I don't have a spiritual gift because I don't know, but mostly I don't care. I'm just Khulekani Magagula, randomly born into this family and not fitting in. Then one unfortunate day I was asked to babysit a strange woman who doesn't understand what a washing machine is and talks from morning till noon.”

She laughs, almost choking from her food. She's not the problem here, he's never amused by anything, he's always this gloomy man and there's nothing she can do to help him.

**He slightly shakes his head and chortles.
She's cute when she laughs, he can forgive
her loudmouth and maybe tolerate her for
another hour or two.**

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 23

NONDUMEZULU

**Nzuzo finally went to bed, only now we are
getting to address the elephant in the room.
I've been looking forward to this moment,
just to hear the real truth.**

“What happened to Aunt Teekay?” I ask.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” she takes a deep breath and puts down her cup of tea. “It’s complicated, there’s been a lot of dark things happening in this family, some of them you found out about when you went to a sangoma.”

My heart drops. “Was it really her?”

“No, she was framed through witchcraft. I can’t tell you who it was because you’re impulsive, just know that your aunt was innocent and she’s where she is now because of the same people who framed her. When it’s safe she will come back, I’m sorry I put you through so much grief, it was the only way to remove a target from her back,” she says.

“So she’s alive?” I’m not shocked as one would be, I never felt the death, something just didn’t add up. I didn’t feel what I felt when my father and other close relatives died. There was no hole in my soul.

“Yeah, she’s alive, but that stays between me and you for now. Don’t even tell Njomane that you know because he will panic,” she says.

So Babo is into this? Very interesting.

“You trust him?” I ask.

“He trusts your aunt, that’s all that matters.”

Who is this? Detective MaNkosi? I’m not used to her scheming and having things planned, I feel like I’m looking at a different woman. She’s so calm and all figured out.

“So Salo heard my father’s voice warning before her car crashed. Is that not a bit strange since I found out that my father’s spirit was taken and he’s a light to someone else’s journey?” I ask..

“Don’t worry, you know they say what has been revealed has been conquered. You going there and finding out about all of that was a starting point, all will be conquered,” she says.

I haven’t seen her this full of hope in a very long time. At this point I’m not even sure I want revenge, I don’t care who did what and when, I just need a light in my life. If I have to fight to have it, I will.

“I’m proud of you,” she says.

That was so random, I don't expect her to be proud of me, I feel like I have failed my duties as a child. I'm her only child, she dedicated her whole life to me, yet she doesn't know what it is to 'enjoy the fruits of your stomach.'

"Why?" I ask her.

"Because you're a good mother to your son. You're doing so well Nondumezulu, I'm always in awe of how put together you are as a single mother regardless of the difficulties you face on daily basis," she says.

"You help me, I wouldn't be able to do it without you."

"That's what grandmothers do. So you were here the whole week with Nzuzo?"

Jeez! I thought we were having a good mother and daughter moment there.

“No,” I say and shift my eyes to the blank TV screen. DSTV is so cruel, if you don’t pay they switch off even your free SABC channels. Luckily Nzuzo understands, he never throws a fit when DSTV isn’t paid for, he plays his toys and goes to bed early.

“Where were you?” she asks.

I can tell that she already have some information. It’s either Mam’ Busie or ‘the hawks’ that she calls our neighbors who told her.

“I went to a friend’s place,” I say.

“The same friend who took Nzuzo and parks his car outside my gate?”

“Yeah, him,” I say.

A moment of silence passes, I'm praying it lasts forever.

But it doesn't...

"You know that I'm not going to help you raise another child, right?"

"No," I shake my head.

She cracks a loud laugh, out of disbelief.

Well, I didn't know she won't help me raise another child until now.

"So you think I'm going to be your unpaid nanny while you continue popping babies?" she asks.

"I'm not pregnant Ma," I laugh. What is it with parents and shouting in advance? She's making it sound like I'm already pregnant.

“I’m just letting you know because I’ve never seen you going to the clinic to get the injections that your peers get,” she says.

Of course my heart skips a beat there, but I trust the Lord and I’m old now, I know my ovulation cycle, there’s no way I’m pregnant.

“I haven’t had a boyfriend, there has been no need,” I tell her.

She raises her eyes, giving me a look that used to threaten me as a child. “So this one is your boyfriend and you’re already bringing him around Nzuzo?”

“He’s a good guy and Nzuzo loves him.”

Not to mention that Nzuzo is the actual reason why we met, if it wasn’t for that can

he threw we would be still living in two different worlds

“Hhayi, asazi!” She picks her cup and sips, then she looks at me. “This is cold now. Can you make me another one?”

“Yes mam!”

I’m feeling relieved that she knows about Nkalipho. Even though I still can’t go in and out of her house as I please, but at least now I don’t have to sneak around. In fact let me call him and tell him we are official; he breaks my heart, my mom deals with him.

“Hey Nkalipho,” I say when he picks up.

“Mmmmm,” he says with no enthusiasm.

“I have told my mother about you,” I tell him.

“Oh okay, what did you tell her? That I’m ‘Nkalipho’,” he asks.

This is not the attitude I’m spending my airtime and battery for.

“I told her that you and I are together,” I’m trying to be calm and collected.

“Maybe you should let it sink in your head, and maybe your heart too, before telling people about it. I’m still just Nkalipho to you, right?”

So this is all about me addressing him by his name? Gosh, I haven’t called a man pet names in years. Unless when I’m screaming for an orgasm, it hasn’t sunk in yet.

“What do you want me to call you?” I’m actually a sweetheart today. When one

goes high, the other one must go low, just so there's peace.

“It must come from your heart,” he's slowly losing the tone and attitude. I think he's going to be a lot to deal with, there are just those subtle little demands he makes under the guise of being sad. “I miss you and Nzuzo, I don't even know what to do with myself. I hate that nobody is fighting me for the remote and I'm going to bed alone, you're not even going to be in the next room,” he says.

“We miss you too. Nzuzo has long gone to bed, there's no TV here,” I say.

There's a long sigh, then he stays on the phone silently. I listen to his silence and wonder what he's doing in that house

alone. He's probably topless and sipping a cold beer while waiting for Masentle to bring him cooked food.

"Can I take you to work tomorrow?" he asks after a moment.

"Yes," I say.

Another moment of silence...

"Do you need anything?" he asks.

I don't need anything, I need everything including the money to pay for my DSTV.

"No, I don't need anything," my pride speaks before my heart. I'm not the begging type, I'd rather sell my ears than to ask for help.

"Can I come and see you before you go to bed?"

Whaaat?

“No, it’s late Nkalipho.” I can’t believe he’s even thinking about it, this is a township for crying out loud.

“I’m going to call you when I’m outside.”

“Nkalipho, I said no!”

“Just a few minutes, please.” He says “please” but drops the call when I’m about to respond. Phewww, why did I call him?

“Itiye!” that’s my mom screaming for her tea.

“Coming,” I say rushing to fill the kettle with water. Yes, I haven’t boiled water, I was still talking to my boyfriend.

I'm so uncomfortable, I keep staring at my phone, if he decided to come against my will he will be here any minute now. As if sent by the devil, my mom is boycotting sleep today, she's still sitting on the couch doing nothing.

I'm in my pyjamas walking up and down, restless.

"Are you not working together?" she asks.

I sink down on the couch with a low sigh.

"I'm waiting for my phone, it's still charging," I say.

"Go to bed, I will bring it, you have to rest," she says.

No, she should go to bed!

But I don't want to raise suspicions, I go to bed and open the curtain so that I can see if there's any car flashing lights outside.

This is the side of mjolo that I don't like; the part that keeps you on edge. I was going to see him in the morning, we are literally just a few hours away, why does he need to come now? Mom may understand that I'm dating, it's part of life, but she won't be happy with me walking out for him at night and leaving my son in bed.

There's a knock at the door. Is my phone fully charged already?

She opens and walks in. "It's ringing," she says.

I take the phone from her hand and take one glance at the screen. It's him, there's a car driving close by.

I look up, my mom is still standing. Fuck, she's waiting for me to answer and then take the phone back to the charger.

I answer with a low voice,

“Hey,”

“I'm outside,” he says.

Clearing-my-throat-loud.

“Mmm okay,” I say.

“Nondu please come out, I want to see you.”

I'm in such a tight position, I have no choice but to say the truth.

“I can't, my mom is still awake,” I say.

I glance at her, she's folded her arms, her eyebrows are raised.

"Must I wait?" he asks.

"I don't know Nkalipho."

A hand grabs the phone from my ear. Well, I expected it.

"Nondumezulu is not coming out. Did you see the time?" she roars to the speaker.

I can't hear what Nkalipho is saying. This one next to me is breathing fire.

"It can wait till tomorrow. If not, you come inside. What kind of a person are you?

Wanting a young woman to come to the streets at this time!" she throws the phone back to me.

I end the call and sit still waiting for my fate.

“You can let him come in and say whatever he’s here to say,” she says.

I release a short sigh of relief.

But then...

“Don’t disrespect me in my husband’s house Nondumezulu. You’re not the madam of this house, I am,” she snaps out of nowhere.

“I know Ma,” I say.

“Then act like a child, it’s almost 9pm and you’re inviting boys inside my house.”

What? She invited him inside, not me.

“Make it fast, remember this is your father’s house,” she turns around and walks away.

After a moment I hear the door of her room shutting. I jump to my feet and dash to the kitchen to get the gate keys. What she doesn’t know is that Nkalipho has been inside this house before, I’m just happy that I’ll be seeing him in the warmth of my home instead of standing in the cold outside.

I expected him to be standing outside the car but I have to open the gate and walk to the car because he’s still inside. Didn’t he hear my mother giving us permission to be lovey-dovey inside the house?

He rolls down the window,

“Please get inside,” he says.

“No, you’re coming inside the house.”

“I can’t, just come and give me a kiss and go.”

I’m confused. Why doesn’t he want to come in?

“You said you miss me,” I say.

He just opens the door and climbs out. I’m thinking we are going inside as my mother asked, but nope, he’s hugging me.

“I can’t go in there, your mom is there,” he says.

“She’s gone to bed, she said you could come in.”

“No, she was just saying that. I miss you Nondumezulu, I just wanted to hold you in my arms and kiss you goodnight,” he says cupping my face and rubbing his lips softly against mine.

“You drive all the way here for a kiss?” I ask.

“There’d be more if I had things my own way,” he says.

Why does that make my panties wet?

“Ngiyakuthanda,” he says.

“I love you too Nkalipho.” I wrap my arms around him, our lips lock into an intimate kiss. It’s cold outside, but being in his arms gets me so warm, I don’t want him to let me go.

“My love,” he breathes heavily against my ear.

“Hey,” I brush his arms, looking up.

“I have to go.” That feels like a death announcement; it jabs right through my heart.

“One last kiss?” I ask.

He chuckles and kisses my nose before grabbing my head and locking his lips into mine again. I’m getting horny; intentionally rubbing my waist against him and moaning in his mouth.

“Don’t do that,” he says in a low whisper.

“Do what?” I ask, still doing it.

“Getting me excited for nothing,” he says and quickly grabs my face for another kiss.

I want him to touch me and get horny, then I want him to leave with his dick aching and pants tight, that is power right there.

“You have no shame Nondumezulu!” the voice thunders behind the gate.

My mom, shwele!

I’m still trying to figure out our next move when the person disappears inside his car, shuts the door and leaves me to defend us alone. I can’t believe my eyes, every girl’s dream is to have a man who will block punches and die before her if there’s an attack.

“I told you that you can’t stand on the streets at night, and what do you do?”

“Hawu Ma, I only took a minute,” I say.

The car hasn't moved yet, but the fact that he's hiding inside says a lot, I'm a man of this relationship.

"Tell him to get out," she orders.

I knock on the window, he rolls it down.

"Ma wants to talk to you," I say.

A heavy sigh!

I do the honors and open the door for him.

I'm glad I cannot see his face right now, just from the way he breathes next to me I can tell that he's about to shit his pants.

"Sawubona Ma," he says in a low voice.

"You're the lawless Nkalipho, right?"

Shuuuh!

"Yebo Ma," he can't be more humble than this.

“This girl you’re asking to come out at night, do you know that she has a son whom she can’t even wash clothes for?”

Excuse me??

She doesn’t wait for anyone’s reply, she goes on; “She’s out here but she left the sink full of dishes.”

“I always....” I was going to say wash them in the morning but she cut me off.

“She only stopped wetting her bed at 7, but now she knows how to jump fences for boys like you,” she says.

She’s out here to embarrass me. She’s trying to break us, little does she know that we are unbreakable, none of the things she’s telling him are going to make him leave me. Enemy of progress!

“I’m sorry Ma,” Nkalipho says.

It’s not working, she decides to bring something else up,

“Who do you expect to babysit for her when you’re calling her to the streets?”

He’s quiet.

“Just so you know, I’m not going to help her raise another child. Whatever you two do, make sure you leave no seeds inside her because she’s come too far. From dropping out of church, drinking and sleeping in her own vomit after, stealing my stokvel money to go to the beach, falling pregnant at 16, selling her sacred church uniform to get a pair of shoes and....” Wow, seriously.

“He gets it,” I tell her.

“Does he? I don’t expect you to be standing here at this hour and I surely want no parked cars at my gates.” She looks at him, “Didn’t your mother teach you respect and tell you that you park a few houses away from a girl’s house, not at the gate?”

“She did.” He’s lying, she died when he was 10, there’s way she could’ve taught him things like that by then. My heart breaks a little because I know his mother is a tough topic for him.

“Next time you come and collect her in the house so that I will be able to arrest you if something happens to her. I expect her to put her son in bed by 8pm and go to her bedroom. Okay?”

“Yebo Ma,” he says.

She turns to me, “You have 5 minutes to stand here and embarrass me in front of God. Also, remove your panties from the drying rack, I left them there last week, they’re still hanging there dry as a paper.”

She leaves, I’m here wanting to throw a huge rock on her back.

There’s a low chuckle, “Your panties...”

Yey, he mustn’t dare! He put me in this position by coming here uninvited.

“If you want to talk about panties I will go and be cold inside,” I say.

“Okay, I won’t. We have to make our 5 minutes worthy, come closer and wrap your arms around my neck, don’t move them from there.”

Now he’s talking!

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 24

NONDUMEZULU

Morning shifts make things easy because I get to see Nzuzo off at the gate of his school. Today we are being fetched by Nkalipho. I'm lucky that my mother is lazy, she's a chair bottomer, knowing that I'm going to get Nzuzo ready and leave with him she can get out of bed at 10am. She's still in bed, I'm spared long explanations

she would've wanted regarding Nzuzo not taking his usual transport. I tell him to go and say goodbye while texting back Nkalipho who's already parked down the street. Yeah, he listened, he will never park outside the gate.

I don't know what's keeping Nzuzo so long in his grandmother's bedroom. My phone rings, I glance at the screen and it's not Nkalipho. I don't recognize the number, I can't say who it is because I don't have a Truecaller app either.

I answer with a low hello, just in case it's witch's phone call.

“Good morning Nondumezulu,” she says in a receptionist-voice.

I've sent out so many CVs, my mind starts running to each, what if...?

"I'm Samantha Dlomo, Solwazi's wife," she says.

No, not on such a beautiful morning! I cannot be getting a call from anyone associated with the Dlomos.

"What do you want?" I can be an asshole, free of charge.

"I know you had a baby and there were back and forths between you and my husband."

"I don't remember the back and forths, why don't you just go straight to the point? I'm busy," I ask.

"I want us to meet, whenever you get a chance. I want him to have a relationship

with his son, if it's his son, we just need to discuss a way forward," she says.

"Solwazi doesn't want to have a relationship with my son. What you want is a non-factor here Samantha, I haven't gotten a call from him in 8 years, one thing I'm not going to do is meet up with a woman I didn't make a baby with to discuss things. And by this I'm not saying tell him to call me, we are fine," I say.

"But the child is autistic and you're just working at Shoprite."

I don't care whether that comes from a sincere place, what I'm not going to do is have a woman I don't know undermine me. 'Just working at Shoprite', what does that even mean?

“I think we are done, have a great day ahead.”

“Can we talk Nondumezulu...” I drop the call, Nzuzo is standing in front of me with his backpack, I’m fighting back tears.

I don’t know Samantha, at least not face to face, but I heard when she married him and when she had her baby showers and got a new car as a gift. I know where her kids go to school, I know what kind of house they live in. People always bring me bits of information about them. She knew about me and Nzuzo, she didn’t find out about us yesterday, but she has never reached out all along. Why now? We bumped into Solwazi, he may have never met Nzuzo in

his life but surely he knew when he saw me with him. He put two and two together but still decided to treat him like a dirty fly on his expensive suit.

I'm not doing this. God knows I'm not!

I won't allow anyone to treat my son as just an autistic child and me as a Shoprite cashier. Nzuzo didn't need to have a father because he was autistic. Neither did I need his support because I work at Shoprite. I needed him because we share a child together, Nzuzo needed him because he's his father.

“Mommy,”

I look down, my eyelids fail to hold the tears. I quickly wipe them off as they drop to my cheeks. But he's seen that I'm crying,

it's a situation no mother wants their child to witness.

“Why are you crying mommy?” He's staring up at me, there's genuine concern in his eyes, this is my little king.

“I'm not crying baby, the wind got in my eyes. Come on, let's hurry, Lume is waiting for us,” I pull his hand. I have to collect myself, Samantha can't ruin this beautiful morning for me.

Nkalipho climbs out and helps Nzuzo into his seat while I sit at the front and perfectly wipe my eyes. He gets on his seat and pulls me for a peck on the cheek. Not-in-the-mouth governs this relationship.

“Are you okay Nzu?” he asks Nzuzo.

“No,” Nzuzo says.

Shock me again! To me he’s been fine since he woke up.

“What’s wrong boy?”- Nkalipho.

“Because my mommy cries.” Oh gosh!

I keep my head straight, I can feel his eyes on me.

“Babe look at me,” he says.

I slowly turn my head, I’m not going to cry, it was just a moment of me failing to control my emotions. I’m not...phewww.

“Let’s go,” I tell him turning my head away.

“Okay,” he doesn’t argue, he starts the car right away.

We go a distance in silence, then Nzuzo starts talking from the back.

“Mommy are we going to watch TV today?”

I hold my breath for a second, then release it.

“Yes baby,” I say.

“Yay!” he’s really happy when he throws his hands up like that.

I’m not going to pay for DSTV today, I will download something from YouTube for him.

“When I get money I will give you for TV,” he says. He’s talking about the R2s he gets from people randomly. He’s the sweetest son, I just wish he wouldn’t have some conversations with me in front of people.

We drop him at the gate, Nkalipho takes R10 out of his wallet and gives him. He’s

confused than happy, he's never carried notes to school.

Things are awkward in the car, I'm keeping busy on my phone, he's driving silently. It's still morning, he parks easily and switches off the car. I'm 10 minutes early, so I put the phone away and turn to look at him.

I don't know how long he's planning to stare at that window.

"Have a great day," I tell him.

He slowly turns his head and looks at me. A sad Nkalipho again! I think I see a sad side of him more than the happy side.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He slightly shakes his head, our eyes are briefly locked.

He looks away and asks, “Is there anything I’m doing wrong?”

“No, why do you ask that?” I’m confused.

“Because I asked if you needed anything yesterday and you said no. But today Nzuzo says you need to pay for your TV. Maybe it’s me who’s the problem, I don’t know how to do it other than asking. You always talk about boundaries, I didn’t grow up around a lot of love and stuff like that, I need you to teach me your love language. Show me how to do it, because I don’t know any other strategy other than asking.”

“Okay,” I say.

There's a moment of silence, then a heavy sigh.

“Do you want a monthly allowance?” he asks.

First I frown, then I laugh. What kind of a question is this?

“Don't laugh, I think it's going to be better that way because you don't want to tell me when you're in need of something, when I ask you just say you don't need anything. I don't know where I stand if you don't talk to me,” he says.

“Let me go to work Nkalipho.” This whole conversation is weird, maybe because I've never been in a position of being taken care of, or rather spoiled by a man.

“Ewallet or EFT?” he asks.

Gosh, he's serious about this allowance thing.

Well, I can't deal with bank charges.

"Ewallet," I say.

He takes his phone out, he's doing it now, we are still parked opposite ATMs.

"Do you know my number by head?" he asks, punching my number into his app.

"No," I say.

It takes a year for me to know people's numbers by head, sometimes never.

"Wow!" he says.

That wow tells me that I have to know his number by head; it's a requirement of this relationship. Who wishes to be me?

Definitely no one.

My phone beeps, I cannot ignore the urge to check how much he's giving me. R3000!

My mouth goes dry. This is not how much I wanted, I hoped for R200 or something.

I gain back my ability to speak and look at him,

“Why this much?” I ask.

“How much do you want?” He confuses me with his questions. He makes it look like I'm entitled to his money, which I'm not, not even one bit.

“Thank you,” I say and take a deep breath to let it sink in that I have R3000 that I didn't break a sweat for.

“Look, I know we just started off and you're not there yet. You probably want to hold on to your independency for a time

being. It puts me in a strange position, I don't want you to struggle, especially for materialistic things. That shit can be fixed easily, it's understandable if you struggle with something I can't help you with. I don't want you to cry, I don't want Nzuzo to grow up witnessing his mother..." He exhales and remains silent for a minute. Then he looks at me, "I'm in this with all my heart, I want it work. I'm in love, my heart beats for you, I haven't been this good and happy in a very long time."

The tears I locked back early just gush out. This person loves me and I feel like I'm still holding back because of the dog that broke my heart 8 years ago. Nkalipho is the kind of a guy I prayed for. He loves me and my son, his family had no problem with me

having a child while he has none, my mom hates him but still gives me 5 minutes to get fingered in the car. There's nothing I cannot love about him and in him.

“What's wrong?” he asks when he realizes that I'm not just tearing up for vibes, but plainly crying. You know when you cry and feel a lump rising to your throat and your eyes burning with more and more tears.

“I'm not having a good morning,” I tell him between the sobs.

Yeah Solwazi won, I'm here with an ewallet of R3000, sitting with an amazing man who courted me for a whole month and have shown me unconditional love over the weeks. Yet a single phone call from his wife is enough to ruin my whole day and

overshadow every good thing that's happening.

“Can we go somewhere else? They can't fire you for missing one day, I will make sure of it,” he says.

I shake my head, “I have to go and work, I'll be fine.”

“I won't be fine,” he says.

“It's not about you,” I regret those words as soon as they leave my mouth. I'm not trying to build walls around me, it's just that sometimes...

“Nzuzo's stepmother called, she said he's an autistic child and I'm just a Shoprite worker. Now she wants me to jump and meet up with her to talk. I haven't heard from these people the entire existence of

Nzuzo, I don't know what they want," I tell him.

"I...I'm sorry babe," he says while digesting it in.

"It's okay, I promise you I will be okay, I will withdraw my Ewallet and buy myself something good for lunch," I say.

"Are you sure? We can go and unwind somewhere, then we can get you a doctor's letter," he asks.

"I'm sure sthandwa sami," I say.

His eyes widen, then he pulls his brows together.

"Say that again," he asks.

I can laugh, he's just blowing it out of proportion.

“Sthandwa sami,” I say.

His whole face lights up. He’s into small gestures of love; know his number by head and call him sweet names. I could say loving him is going to be so easy.

“Is that how you saved my number?” he asks.

Maybe not too easy...

“No, I saved it as Nkalipho,” I say and embrace myself for his reaction. .

“Oh, okay,” he says.

He’s not going to be sad about it?

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AUNT TEEKAY

She's sitting in front of the TV watching a cook show because there's literal nothing else she keep herself busy with inside this house. A knock comes from the door disturbing her from her show.

Who could it be? Khulekani was here an hour ago, there's no way he's back.

She opens the door, and it's him.

"Did you forget something?" she asks, stepping aside to let him in.

"Your call," he says, his phone blares its ringtone right away.

He moves away while she answers, just so she can have some privacy.

It's Delani, he finally remembered the woman he left here with strangers.

"I'm so sorry MaNkosi, things have been busy, I should've called." He starts by apologizing, at least he understands that something is wrong.

"What was so busy Delani that you couldn't even give me a 1-minute call?" She's fuming.

"Salabenzi got into a car accident, I had to go to the hospital and still maintain things in the house," he says.

"Please don't make your problems mine. We have a deal Delani, stick to it, you don't have enough time left," she says.

"I'm on it...Thembelihle I love you," he says.

It sounds genuine until she remembers all the bad things he's done to her. Forgiving will take decades, that's if she ever forgives him.

But, this is for the mission she's on with her sister; she can't back out from it.

"I love you too," she tells him.

"I will see you soon, my love."

As the phone drops she picks a glass with water and gulps it down.

Khulekani comes out from the kitchen, he's wearing his jean jumpsuit- shoulders lets off and Nike sneakers. It looks like he's coming from somewhere. Even the way he smells, surely there was a woman he

wanted to impress, bad for her, whoever it is.

Thembelihle gives him back his phone and sits.

“Thank you,” she says.

Khulekani steps closer, “You don’t look okay. Is it the phone call?”

“I’m okay, just tired of sitting like this,” she says with a low sigh. She cannot display any private information, especially the relationship aspect of her life.

“You can talk to me,” he begs sitting next to her on the couch.

“Thank you, but I cannot discuss this with kids,” she says.

Here she comes again with this insinuation!

“I’m going to my 40s, don’t call me a kid Thembelihle,” he says, as calm as he could be.

“Still going to? Ah, you’re a child,” she insists waving her hand to dismiss him.

A moment of silence passes...

“Maybe I have to show you that I’m old instead of just telling you about it.”

She chuckles, “I’m kidding, I know you’re a grown man with bad attitude.”

“I’m not kidding, I will show you that I’m not a child,” he says, not laughing.

This is getting serious. She snaps her eyebrows, looking at him.

“Khulekani don’t...” He doesn’t her finish.

He cuts her short, “Ayibonane
MaNkosi...Aunt Teekay.”

The eyes of this chi...man! He’s looking at
her like he plans to swallow her and her
wet-mouth when he returns.

“I’m someone’s second wife to be,” she
warns as he walks towards the door.

Hopefully he listens and doesn’t come back
with that naughty look.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 25

AUNT TEEKAY

Within a blink of an eye the sun has set. She's still thinking about Khulekani vowing to come back for her. There was something there that she cannot shake off. He's definitely not a child, he's just a little younger than her, but even that isn't a wide gap. Maybe she teased him too much because she knows that he kind of doesn't like her, or rather say her character.

She's not the type to be threatened by men, let alone one who's even younger than her. This is stupid! She's locked the door and closed the windows and switched off the lights. The TV is off, she's in control of her breaths so that if he comes he'll think she's sleeping. It's not the frightened type of fear,

she just doesn't want to be in a position where Khulekani has the upper hand. He's her bodyguard, it's her she listens to, not the other way around.

The door handle moves, her eyes pop out. Is it him? Of course it is, who else could be here at this time?

"Thembelihle," the voice says.

She frowns. That's Delani's voice, not Khulekani's.

"Please open the door, it's me." It's the devil himself!

Why is he here? She can feel the heat coming out of her nose, ears and every hole there's in her body. What a turn-off!

She switches the lights back on and finds the door key and goes to open. He's

wearing a raincoat, it's not even flooding outside, just a few drops of rain. He should be wearing a vest and letting the rain run down his body, that's what real men do.

“You're not even going to hug me?” He's right behind her as she storms back to the bedroom where she was fearfully waiting for Khulekani.

“You're wet,” she says climbing on bed.

Delani takes off his raincoat and boots.

He's smiling like a retard looking at her with needy eyes. He took a risk coming

here, his wife thinks he's sleeping in

Tongaat so that he can see their daughter in the morning. He chose to come here

instead, in the morning he will be taking

taxis to the hospital, hopefully nothing will go wrong and put her in a difficult position.

“You look so beautiful. I’ve never seen you wearing this night-dress,” he compliments, getting in bed next to her.

“You don’t know all my things Delani,” she says.

He chuckles, “Yeah, you’re right. I didn’t even know you had a lipstick, you look so sexy with those red lips.”

“Thanks,” she releases a deep breath.

He gets closer and pulls her for a tight embrace. She turns her face to him, their lips lock. He’s hungrily kissing her and sticking his tongue for a sloppy, deep kiss. She’s always been sexually attracted to him, but tonight things are just different.

It's the first time they've been in bed together after the food poisoning incident.

"I'm not ready yet Delani," she says.

He stops, he's confused. They want each other, she said on the phone she loves him too. He brushed his teeth, chewed minty gums and used a body spray. He came here because he's had a lot of down-moments at home, he hoped to come here and unwind.

"Thembalami," he says.

She looks at him, her eyes getting softer.

Obviously she has a soft spot for him, especially when he looks at her with those needy eyes. She's known him since he was just a boy, way before Busisekile came.

"I'm doing something, I'm trying to re-write my wrongs, you're going to be home soon. I

burn impepho every night and ask my brother to visit his daughter. I can only do that for now,” he says, desperate for a warm welcome.

“When are you doing the ceremonies?” she asks.

“Once I’ve gone to Kwamhlabuyalingana as Magagula suggested,” he says.

Thembelihle sighs. At times she feels sorry for him, he’s still lost as he was as a boy. Right now he knows that Busisekile has been doing things to make him weak and easy to control. But he only wants to be cleaned of those things, then he will continue with his marriage because they’ve been married for years and they have 3 beautiful children together and she was

pushed by love to do what she did. He'd rather take a second wife than to get rid of Busisekile.

"Have you ever talked to her about polygamy?" she asks.

"No, but MaKhumalo is not a jealous type of wife," he says.

Thembelihle laughs, "Only because she has her magic tricks and you can do anything she wants, even if it's taking a life of someone you claim to love."

"Are you ever going to forgive me for that?" he asks with a low sigh.

"Maybe I will, if you stick to your word," she says.

"Give me time." He cups her face and looks into her eyes.

She's tamed now.

"I have been missing you," he says.

She smiles, "Is that why you came here unannounced?"

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep another night." His hand lifts her short night-dress and rests on her left hip. Their eyes are locked. He's the kind of man she likes; a beta male because she's an alpha woman.

She massages him around the waist before sliding her hand in his boxers and grabbing his excited shaft. He gasps and licks his lips like a starved puppy.

"How is this little man doing?" she asks.

He nods, "Good...good..."

She's moving her soft hand around it. His breaths are running short.

"Good... good MaNkosi," he says repeatedly.

She pulls down her pants and boxers and sits between his legs. He's already trembling, his shaft is bursting veins and bouncing up and down on its own. True to God, if she lets him inside that thick, black coochie he will nut within a second.

"Are you cold?" she asks, teasing him about his shaking hands.

"Ngicela usale sewunginika phela MaNkosi," he begs. (just give it to me, please)

She smiles and gently massages his balls.

He's moaning her name already.

Then there's a soft knock on the bedroom window. Thembelihle's heart might have stopped beating for 10 seconds.

All their movements have paused, their eyes are on the window.

The knock comes again.

"Let me see who it is," she whispers climbing off him.

"No, no, no! You stay here," he's loud enough to get the shadow moving from the window. When he gets to the window and asks who it is, nobody responds.

He opens the window and sees no one.

"This is strange, I have to call Magagula," he's obviously panicking.

Thembelihle stands up immediately, “No, don’t call him, I’m sure it was those young naughty boys who play soccer till late.”

“What if I wasn’t here and you were alone?” He’s calling Magagula.

Thembelihle exhales heavily and sinks back on the bed.

He talks to Magagula for a few minutes.

She’s not living here for free, that old man gets paid, it’s his job to ensure that Thembelihle is safe, not only from witchcraft but from thugs as well.

He puts his phone away and gets in bed,

“Tomorrow you will have someone guarding you at night.”

She frowns, “Guarding me, how?”

“Staying in the cottage behind this house.”

“What about Khulekani?”

“He was a wrong choice in the first place, he doesn’t get along with his family, he’s likely to abandon you and not check if you’re safe just to spite his father,” he says.

“But he hasn’t done that yet,” she’s going on a full protest.

“Don’t worry, your next guard will take care of you better. Where were we?” He’s lying on his back, he’s still horny and excited about the deed.

She’s not, she’s over this whole thing.

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SALO MHLONGO

I'm really getting better now. I have no difficulties walking, my body hurts less, I have no morning sickness, no family issues. I can't wait to get discharged and go back to my normal life. Hopefully by the end of this week I'll be sleeping in my own bed.

Today I'm expecting my father to visit, but of course the first people I see are the Zungus. The whole family has been supportive, yesterday Nokwanda came here with a bunch of flowers and boy stories. Mam' Zungu has been constantly calling to check up on me. She sounds like a warm, loving person. Maybe overly-obsessed with God, but it's nothing I can't handle. I've had to close my eyes and listen

to her praying for me and the baby over the phone. I don't come from a religious family, I don't know if they slaughter and burn impepho like we do, hopefully there won't be a clash of beliefs.

“You're doing better now,” Nkatha says walking in.

I smile, “I feel better.”

We are not buddies but we are slowly getting there. He's not bad as I thought he was. He's warmed up to me, I'm no longer just a young girl who fell pregnant for his brother for money.

Zothani kisses my lips and hands me a bunch of flowers. It looks like I'm lying in a floral shop than a hospital. I have to find a place for these flowers as well.

“You look so beautiful,” he says in a low whisper.

I smile, “You don’t look bad yourself.”

Our eyes lock, I miss him so badly.

Nkatha clears his throat, “I hear you might be discharged in two days.”

“Oh, I haven’t heard that.” How come he knows these things and I don’t, I’m the patient here, not him.

“Have you thought of where you’re going to stay after being discharged?” he asks.

“My place, obviously.” I look at Zothani with a slight frown. I don’t know what happens to him when his brother is around, he just keeps quiet and lets him do all the talking. Maybe he thinks I can’t argue with Nkatha the way I do with him.

“You need to have someone taking care of you for at least a week. Of course you can’t go home because it’s far, you have to be closer to Zothani and your OB. You will have to move in with umama,” he says.

“Umama kabani?” I ask. (whose mother)

“Our mother,” he says.

Move in with their mother? The one who prays for an hour over the phone? Their father is alive and living there too.

“No, I can’t,” I say.

“Why?” Zothani decides now it’s the right time for him to open his mouth.

“Because no,” I say.

“Come on babe, I’m going to be there too, they are expecting us to come.”

“No Zothani, why do we need to be babysat? My hands are functioning, so are yours, we don’t need...”

“I have a job, I can’t be with you 24/7,” he says.

I look at Nkatha, then at him. He’s already talked to Zothani and decided this was what’s going to happen, they’re just here to inform me. It doesn’t matter what I say, this Nkatha has convinced Zothani what the right thing is.

“Owkaay,” he says when my silence satisfies him. “Brother, I have to go, I still need to go through those lab technician applications, some just apply with matric certificates to waste our time.”

“Good luck with that!” They bump fists.

Their siblingship is good to watch. Maybe if Sbonga came close after me we would have a tight....

Wait!

“Lab technician?” I ask as Nkatha turns his back.

“Don’t tell me you want to apply, he’s not a good boss,” Zothani says.

He laughs, “At least I don’t curse at my team.”

They’re playing, I’m not.

“My sister has a degree in biochemistry and biology. She was a top student, she’s been looking for a job for years,” I say.

“Really?” – Nkatha.

“I swear to God. Are the applications closed?”

“Yes, they are,” he says.

I look at Zothani, I’m pregnant with his baby, I have given him orgasms and sucked his dick. Surely he can do something.

**He clears his throat and looks at Nkatha,
“Just one more CV Manzini.”**

“I’m against nepotism, you know that. I can tell you when another job post opens, if I take her CV I’ll have to take from others as well, many people need jobs,” he says.

Zothani keeps quiet. He’s never this quiet when he’s asking me for sex. I look at him again, this is his brother, they’re from one dick, he can twist Nkatha’s arm.

“It’s not nepotism, you don’t even know her. You’re a single parent, surely you know the struggles. Just take the CV and invite her for an interview, from there afterwards you can hire fairly,” he says.

I don’t want Nkatha to hire fairly, I want him to hire Nondu dark or blue, whether there’s someone more experienced than her or not.

“Fine, forward me her CV,” he says to Zothani and then walks out.

Fist raised! Yaaas.

I have to call Nondu, she needs to email Zothani that CV immediately. This could be the big break she’s been praying for.

“You owe me a blowjob for this,” Zothani says.

I laugh, “She’s not even hired yet and you are already naming your prize.”

“Just making it known. How is munchkin?”

He brushes my tummy and kisses my forehead. I look at him and smile, now I forgive him for bringing his brother to tell me that I will be moving in with their parents in two days. Nepo brothers!

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 26

AUNT TEEKAY

A man who could be in his mid-thirties walks in with her breakfast. He doesn't even look like he can kill a cockroach with those thin arms. They really replaced Khulekani with this? He greets with a smile. A total opposite of what Khulekani was, that one never smiled, he didn't enjoy serving her and being around her, which made everything enjoyable. She looked forward to talking about everything under the sun while he just sat there looking uninterested and annoyed.

“Did you sleep good sistera?” Jeez, he even calls her sistera, what's that?

She nods, “Yeah, I slept good.”

“I'm happy to hear that. I heard that someone was knocking on your window

last night, they're lucky I wasn't around because if I was, this whole place would be upside down. There would be traffic of ambulances and hearses on these streets.

Angibhenywa mina sistera, Mkhulu

Magagula knows that, you can even ask anyone around here who Mamba is.”

Okay, she has to breathe and embrace this new arrangement. Obviously he swallowed a radio, he's going to be doing all the talking here.

He's taking a seat, even more great.

“Don't you have a day job?” she asks.

“This is my day job sistera, I protect the Magagula property.” He looks at her, eyes squinted. “You don't look sick, why are you here?”

“Running away from demons,” she says.

He frowns, “Real demons?”

“Toy demons,” she’s a bit annoyed.

“Hhayi sistera uyadlala wena. Demons are something else, I used to be in class with one girl who was demonic...” No, no, no! She knows these type of stories, they’re long and boring. She didn’t even mean those type of demons, just Busisekile.

“I’m going to take a nap, thanks for breakfast Mamba,” she says, abruptly cutting him short.

“Okay, I will be in the cottage if you need something,” he says and gets off the couch straightening his pants. He’s short and skinny, which makes her wonder if he’s really dangerous as he claims to be.

She clears her throat before he exit.

“Where is Khulekani?” she asks.

“Bhut’ Khulekani is hardly home, you know him and his father don’t get along that much. He could be in Durban as we speak,” he says.

“Oh, why don’t they get along?” She’s looking at him curiously. Delani brought this up as well, maybe it’s for public information.

“Nobody takes him seriously around here, even his younger brother married his ex-girlfriend,” Mamba says and laughs.

“That’s sad. Were they together when his brother married her or it was already an ex?”

“Mthuthuzeli can get any woman he wants, even you,” he says with a cheeky grin.

“Good for him!” She’s secretly rolling her eyes.

“I’m not playing sistera, you might leave this place as his future fifth wife.” He walks out of the door and whistles on his way to the back cottage.

Now for the first time, she’s interested in this Magagula family. The brothers are all in the traditional healing journey, except for Khulekani. Magagula is all wrinkled up and old, when he coughs his chest sounds like an empty tin, yet he has a wife almost Nondu’s age. It’s all a bit strange when you look at it.

And also, Magagula's relationship with Delani. How did Delani end up buddies with such an old man? He claims he's not the nyanga he used to perform his dark tricks, which leaves her with a lot of questions.

There are footsteps coming closer to the door. She's hoping it's not Mamba again.

The door opens, "Sistera."

Well, well...

"Mamba," she looks up.

"Aww I thought you were going to take a nap," he says with that cheeky grin making his way in. He's holding a cellphone in his hand, she quickly realizes that she has a phone call.

“I’m about to go, who is it?”

“Your sister,” he says.

At least it’s not Delani, he’s getting clingy and hard to deal with. Or is it her who needs distance without letting him know?

It’s MaNkosi calling, she takes the phone and goes to the kitchen to answer.

“I thought I was abandoned,” she answers.

“That’s a bad thought. I haven’t had airtime in days. It’s actually your niece who wants to talk to you,” MaNkosi says.

A deep breath! The last time she had a conversation with Nondu things weren’t good. She doesn’t hate Nondu, Delani and his wife are responsible for what the sangoma told her.

“Is she okay?” she asks.

MaNkosi sighs, “Yeah, she’s okay and dating again.”

“That’s good, I advised her to live a little, she’s young.”

“Hopefully you told her not to get pregnant again.”

“She’s old enough to know that now, she learnt her lesson with that Dlomo boy.”

Nondu grunts from the background and yells, “I’m right here guys, I can hear you are on loudspeaker.”

“What’s the boy’s name weqhikiza?”

Thembelihle asks.

“Nkalipho Mnguni, I’m not going to get pregnant,” she yells behind MaNkosi.

**“You better not! Did you go to the clinic?” –
MaNkosi.**

They called her but now they’re arguing and not really engaging with her. She’s smiling as she listens to them going back and forth, she knows that her sister is happy but she just won’t show Nondu that because she might get carried away and be reckless again. But she’s done a lot, she learnt her lesson and became a good daughter. It’s about time she mingles and lives her life again. In fact it was long overdue, MaNkosi hasn’t shouted about boys in years, it got to the point where they suspected that maybe something was wrong with her, hence boys no longer played around her.

“Nondu take the phone from your mother, I want you to tell me about the boy,” she says playfully. The conversation they need to have is more than just her dating life, there’s a lot that need to be dusted.

“Hey aunty,” – Nondu.

“Hey baby, so how old is the boy?”

“Not old at all,” Nondu says.

“Does he work? You need someone who will give you money for your hair and nails.”

Nondu laughs, she’s not always a cool aunt but when she decides to be one she’s fun to have. “Yeah, he works and he’s not stingy.”

“Good, now make sure he loves you more than you love him.”

Nondu laughs.

Then there's a moment of silence...

"I'm not angry at you," she says.

Nondu exhales audibly, "I'm really sorry aunty, I feel so bad that I hated you for nothing and disrespected you like that. I can't believe you almost died and I was holding a stupid grudge against you."

"I don't blame you, it's your life that's been gambled with and turned upside down. But you will get justice, even if it's the last thing I do," she says.

"Where are you? When are you coming back?" She's concerned.

"I cannot reveal that until I'm sure your uncle won't turn back on his promises. How's work? Is Nzuzo coping at school?"

“Everything is okay this side. Nzuzo still loves school. I just hope one day things will be okay, a day ago I was asked to email my CV and then later I got invited for an interview next week by one doctor in Umhlali, Dolphin Coast,” Nondu says. She’s hopeful like she’s always been before going to interviews, but she’s been disappointed too many times that she didn’t even get a joyful leap of heart when she received that interview email.

“That’s good news baby. Babo has to burn impepho for you before you go.”

“No thanks,” Nondu says with a chuckle.

“Trust me, he’s going to do the right thing, I will make sure of it.”

“I don’t trust anyone now, I’d rather just go and give it my best shot without relying to God or ancestors,” Nondu says.

She’s right to be scared of everyone. It was a bad suggestion from her, Delani can’t be trusted, he loses his senses when he’s around Busisekile.

“I will be praying for you,” she says.

“Thank you aunty, if I get this job I will buy you a new bed as peace offering.”

Thembelihle laughs, “Now I’ll be praying even harder for you to get that job. Where’s your mother?”

“She’s in the bedroom, hold on for a minute...”

There are no hard feelings, that’s still her niece, it’s good to be able to hold a good

conversation with her again. She has a good reason to be with Delani, it's for the sake of Nondumezulu. The closer she gets to him is the more he will work against his wife. She was almost distracted by Khulekani, how thirsty of her? It's okay if they never meet again, he's probably in Durban as Mambane said, which is good because she won't lose her focus again.

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SALO MHLONGO

I was discharged today from the hospital, and as the mighty Nkatha had decided I'm on my way to Belvedere to live with their

parents for a week or longer. I've never had an official boyfriend whom I go the parents house with or invite to meet my parents.

This will be my first time going to a boyfriend's parents house, I don't know what to expect or how to act to show that I'm a good choice for their son. My parents don't even know that I'll be here, I hope my mother doesn't come and turn this place upside down when she finds out.

The house is smaller than what I expected. Maybe it's just me who'd do dramatic things for my parents when I have a lot of money. This is a house like any other house in the neighborhood, not that it's bad, it's simpler than what both sons live in.

“We are home,” he says opening my door with a smile plastered on his face.

I’m nervous, I can’t even smile back.

He helps me out and then takes my bags from the back.

We make our way to the front door, I’m pulling my dress wondering if it’s not too short. My mother never taught me those things; how to dress at a boy’s home and all the do’s and don’s. I don’t think she’s ever thought of me finding someone and the possibility of me getting married, she just thinks I’ll be her child forever.

Okay, the inside is out of this world. I judged them too early for not upgrading their home. Glass-front cabinetry, silestone

worktop and porcelain tiled floors. It doesn't look like a kitchen of an old woman, they make her cook with a Bosch free-standing stove. I'm such a clumsy person, I don't think I will fit to use this kitchen, it doesn't look like it has ever been stained before.

I didn't even realize I've been holding my breath walking into the sitting room where the parents are seated. I'm immediately calmed by the smile on their faces. I don't know why Mam' Zungu put her husband in that KK shiny suit.

"Sanibonani," I'm at ease when greeting them.

Mam' Zungu stands, she's also dressed up like she's attending an important church event. "Kanti umncane kangaka!"

She's actually hugging me, okay.

"Zothani didn't tell us you're a mere child," she's still shocked.

I look younger than my age, on the other hand Zothani has muscles and a good height. We don't complement each other at all.

"It's legal to be with her Ma, don't make me look bad," Zothani says.

His father laughs and stands to shake my hand. I feel welcomed, they're old and warm.

"We finally meet you MaNjomane, have a seat," he says.

Zothani pulls the chair for me and then leaves with my bags once I'm seated.

"It's nice to finally meet you, maybe after the baby is born Zothani will come home more often," Mam' Zungu says.

That leaves a question mark in my head. They think the baby will live here? I wonder where they got that from.

"I hope so," I say, keeping a smile on my face.

He comes back wearing a different T-shirt and sits next to me.

"Let's pray and thank God for your safe trip home," – Bab' Zungu.

This is exactly what he was talking about, I almost laugh before closing my eyes.

Luckily the prayer is shorter than the one

Mam' Zungu made over the phone. She suggests that we have an early dinner so that I can rest.

She cooked a three-course meal, I'm going to be loving it here. I'm reminded of my mother's cooking, sadly I can no longer feast on her stew because Nkatha wants me to eat food specifically prepared and....wait!

I look at Zothani, "It's okay for me to just eat everything here?"

"Yeah, why not?" he says.

"Eat anything you want MaNjomane," Bab' Zungu adds.

Okay, this is strange, I guess his mother cooks healthier food than MaKhumalo.

He helps his mother clear the table after dinner, I wait for him to show me the bedroom and where I'm supposed to take a bath.

He takes me to the room closer than the one his father disappeared to. It's a small house, I understand they didn't have enough space, hopefully it's soundproofed. My bags are still on the floor, I sit on the bed and wait for him to unpack for me.

“Is it me or the food rules doesn't apply to everyone's mother?”

He looks up with a slight frown. It's not a big deal, I just need clarification because my mother was offended.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“How did your mother know what to cook and how to cook it? You told me I can't just eat anything,” I say.

“Ummm...she cooks healthy food, you don't have to worry.”

“My mother cooks healthy food too. I thought it was more than that.”

“It's only that, we are just extra careful.”

He opens the first bag and unfolds the clothes to put them in hangers.

“And what makes your mother think the baby will be staying here?”

“Where else could the baby stay?”

“With me or with my mother back home.

We are not married.”

“That can be arranged,” he says with a slight shrug. He’s not taking this seriously, I’ve had him and Nkatha making decisions for me, it has to either stop or slow down. I’m a fully functioning adult with her own mind.

“I’m not going to be a guest of my own life Zothani. You and your brother are controlling me now, you know very well that I don’t like that. Talk to me, discuss things with me first and hear my opinion, then take it into consideration.”

“I’m not in the mood to fight Salo. What are you going to wear?”

“My voice is what I’m going to wear Zothani Zungu.” I grab the bag with my toiletries and head to the bathroom. I hate

it when we fight but I guess there's no way to avoid it when you're being bullied in a relationship.

I'm naked, filling the bathtub while contemplating whether to report this to my mother or not. We've never had a relationship talk, I don't know if she's got good advices, I mean she forgives my father for cheating, which I'm glad for, but she's likely to tell me to be patient with him. Eventually I decide to die in silence, I'll figure this one out on my own. I take a bath and return to the bedroom naked. My neck needs a pillow, I've had it up for so long. He took out my pyjamas, I put them on and get in bed.

He's still sorting out the wardrobe, I'm not talking to him until further notice. I get under the covers with my phone and open my Whatsapp. One from Nondu telling me that she got an email to attend an interview next week. That was fast, I'm glad Nkatha came through, now he has to hire her, then him and I will be best friends. I wonder how her boyfriend is going to feel when she has to move away, their relationship is still on the foundation phase. Nzuzo will have to stay with granny too, I don't know if Nondu will cope without him next to her.

“Salo,”

I keep quiet and continue chatting to my people.

“Can we talk?”

I don't say anything. He has his brother whom he discusses things with, he needs to talk to him and then come to inform me when they're done.

"Your father asked me to take care of you," he says.

I lift my head and look at him. Is my father dead?

"Why would he ask you to take care of me while he's still alive? Also, I can take care of myself and taking care of me doesn't mean control me," I say.

"I'm protecting my baby. Your mother doesn't want you to have a baby. If someone she shares a bed with warns me about her and suspects that my baby could

be in danger, I have no choice but to protect what's mine," he says.

I need to sit. I thought the drama between my parents was over. I can't believe they're now involving a baby that's not even here.

"When did my father say that?" I ask.

"He called me and said you gave him my number. That's why Nkatha didn't let you eat the food she brought you and why I want the baby to stay with my parents, if not with us," he says.

"This is crazy, I'm calling him." My hands are shaking. He hurt my mother, he cheated on her, and now he's busy badmouthing her to people, ruining her reputation? No, he doesn't get to do that to my mother.

Zothani grabs the phone from my hands by force.

“You can’t call him,” he says pushing it into his pocket.

Now this fight is getting real, he can’t use his power like that, I have the right to call and confront my father.

“Give me back my phone Zothani!” I demand getting off the bed.

“Your father is not against you having a baby, you want to fight with the wrong person.”

“Just give me my phone,” I’m following him around the bed, I’m close to blowing up and causing a crazy scene.

“He could be with your mother, this is our baby’s life we are talking about. I won’t let

you do this while your emotions are this high.” There he goes again, controlling me.

“This is a marriage war, it has nothing to do with the baby, my father is playing dirty and I need to talk to him.” I stop chasing him around and fold my arms.

“No, I can’t let you do that.”

I let out just one shrill cry, his eyes pop out. Within a minute there’s someone knocking at the door.

“Zothani!” It’s his mother.

Let’s see where his physical power will get him now.

“Open the door Zothani,” his mother yells.

He hesitates for a moment, then he throws my phone on the bed and goes to the door.

His mother walks in, “What’s happening here?”

“Just a little argument Ma, we are sorry for the noise.”

Mam’ Zungu looks at me and asks if I’m alright.

“He’s taking my phone,” I tell her.

“Hhayi Zothani, what’s wrong with you? If your father comes here you will be out of the door. Is it your phone or hers?”

“I have given it back,” he says.

“Why did you take it in the first place?” She looks at me, “Let me know if he takes it again, his father will deal with him.”

“Thank you Ma,” I get back in bed.

He closes the door after his mother and turns back to me with a look of disappointment.

I pull up the covers and dial my father's number. I'm preparing my speech as it rings. I'm not disrespectful as a child but this is one fight I'm going to choose a side on. My mother doesn't deserve this, I wonder what he's trying to achieve.

It rings unanswered. I call again, I know he's still awake.

Then it's answered.

"Sawubona baba," I say.

He's still talking to someone in the background. I'm not sure if it's intentional or not, he's wasting my airtime. It's my

mother he's talking to, it sounds like an argument.

“What if something happens to her instead of the baby?” he asks her.

How coincidental is this? They're talking about the baby. My baby to be precise.

“Nothing is going to happen to her, this will only strike her womb. I don't know why we are discussing this again, we gave Salabenzi everything because we needed her to uplift this family, to put our name on the map. Not to start a family before her siblings even finish school,” that's my mother's voice. As hard as it is to listen to her say that, I keep quiet and listen.

“But this boy loves her, he’s capable of letting her support her siblings while he takes care of the baby,” – that’s my father.

My mother laughs out loud.

“You didn’t hear her talking about compromises...”

My hands tremble, the phone drops to my lap, Zothani’s hand picks it. He listens to the rest of the conversation and then drops the call.

He throws the phone back to me. I have tears running down my face.

“Please keep it low,” he gets in bed and pulls the covers over his head.

I pick a pillow and bury my face on it. I don’t understand why would my mother even think of doing such to me? Every

month when I get paid I split my salary into three. For my needs, for theirs at home, and for my siblings at boarding school. Now I can't have a life because of that? And what does she mean they gave me everything I have? I worked my butt off, they couldn't even send me to a decent school to further my education.

“Cry with order Salo, my mother will think I'm doing something to you again.”

That's all he cares about? Wow.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 27

SALO MHLONGO

After a moment I feel his hand touching my shoulder. I've been crying for both his attention and what I heard my mother saying.

“Babe you just came from the hospital, I don't like hearing you cry like this, calm down.”

For a moment I thought he didn't care. He gets out of bed and leaves, when he comes back he's carrying a packet of Nik-Naks and a bottle of water.

“Drink water,” he gives the bottle to me.

I take two sips and close the cap and give the bottle back to him.

He sits next to me and opens the packet of Nik-Naks. I don't know how he hopes snacks will heal my broken heart. I can't stomach anything right now, I have a lump stuck in my throat.

He exhales heavily and puts them aside.

“Look,” he holds my hand. I turn my face and look at him, my eyelids are heavy, probably swollen. He does care, it's written in his eyes.

“You are loved,” he says.

“By my mother?” I ask.

“By me. So I'm going to do everything in my power to protect you and our munchkin. I'm not going to fight with your

mother, I don't want you to fight either, one day she will realize how happy you are with me and our little munchkin, and she will make peace with it."

"That's not even the case Zothani." Gosh, I'm tearing up again. "She says they gave me everything so that I can raise my siblings. You can call Nondu right now and ask if I ever had it easy growing up. I understand black tax, that's one thing many African kids excluding you and your brother, suffer from. What my mother wants from me is something different, she wants my life to stop so that her other kids can progress. I don't understand why."

He pulls me to his chest and wipes my tears with his T-shirt. I snuggle onto him and cry

on his chest. This time he wraps his arms around me and tells me things will be okay. I'm not sure how there are going to be okay, I might not be able to go home for the next 8 months or so. I believe what my father told him, I feel so guilty that I was ready to side with my mother without gathering any facts.

“Please promise me you're not going to act on this while you're angry, just avoid her and keep your distance. I have your father's permission to keep you wherever you're going to be safe. Once your mother accept the baby I will pay for the damages, nenkomo kababa,” he says the last part with his eyes on me.

My lips crack into a thin smile. No, I wasn't a virgin when he met me, but he's going to pay for having a slice of cake illegally.

"Your parents are in the room next to ours?" I ask.

He chuckles, "Yeah, and these rooms are not soundproofed. We are only going to be here for a week and you're still not 100% okay anyway," he says.

"I wasn't thinking about those things, uyaphapha," I say.

"Then why did you ask?" He entwines his fingers with mine. We are cuddling, my neck hurts less when I'm on a man's chest.

"Because I have a good hearing," I say.

"A good hearing? They don't make any noise."

My eyes widen. I didn't expect that response.

He chuckles, "This has always been my room and I've never heard a thing even when I was a child, you should learn a trick or two from my mother."

God help me look at Mam' Zungu the same after hearing this.

His hand tightens around mine.

"Mawakhe," he says.

I've never been called this before but somehow it sounds good.

"Babe," I give him my attention.

"Whenever you're in pain, physically or emotionally, just know that I'm feeling twice that pain. I prayed for you to come to

my life. I prayed for someone I can start a family with, I was very specific, and God delivered exactly what I wanted. I'm going to protect you and my right to be a father to a living child." He means it, I know he wanted to be a father, now that he's about to become one he's going to fight anything that threatens to stand on his way.

I need to focus on our goal and help him protect me. I'm glad my dad trusted him with me, he's very gentle. I take back my words that he's a bully; he was only trying to protect me.

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When I woke up Zothani had left for the gym, Mam' Zungu had already prepared breakfast and ate with her husband and left mine in the microwave. I'm not ashamed of waking up at 9am, I have a good excuse for it- pregnancy.

I'm in my room with a bowl of Jungle Oats and a phone in my hand. I know my father answered my call on purpose, he wanted me to hear the truth. Had he not done that, I wouldn't have believed him. I still want to call my mother though, not to confront her, I will get emotional and end up saying a bunch of inappropriate things. I just want to hear what she's going to say to me.

I call her number and put the call on loudspeaker as it rings.

“Hello Salabenzi, what did I do to deserve your call so early in the morning.”

I’m not a frequent caller, especially with her.

“Hi Ma,” I say, there’s a lump rising to my throat again.

I need to breathe and keep my emotions in check.

“Yebo ntombi yami. How are you? I hear you got discharged and got fetched by your boyfriend.” Now I’m just reading more to every word she says.

“Yeah, I could’ve come home but it’s far from my doctors,” I say.

“But closer to your ancestors. Salabenzi sometimes you have to think like an African child, your father was supposed to

tell you to come home from the hospital so that we can perform a ceremony and thank the ancestors for saving you.”

“I was saved by Babomdala, I will call MaNkosi and ask her to thank him for me in her house. I think that’s an appropriate way of doing it,” I say and realize how much sense it actually makes.

“No, it should be done here because everyone is here,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I’m confused.

“What do I mean by what?”

“You said everyone is there,” I say.

She laughs, “Oh that, I mean that your father is the only one who burns impepho at the alter, so it’s better we just do it here.”

“MaNkosi is married, she has the right to burn impepho, doesn’t she?”

“No, she doesn’t have any right.”

Well, I’m not an experts of those things, I will take her word for it.

“Fine, dad can do it, but I won’t be there,” I say.

“Why not? Your boyfriend has a car, he can drive you here and take you back to where it’s closer to the doctors,” she says.

“No, I’m not coming. Also, I won’t have any money to send home this month, you need to make sure that Sbonga and Sekho’s grant covers some of their needs.”

“What? Do you even know how much grant is? It only covers the taxi fare to the ATM and a taxi back home,” she says.

I don't have a child who's a grant recipient but I know some people survive on that money alone. They buy grocery, electricity and their children's education. Yet MaKhumalo can only pay for taxi with hers "You and dad have to make a plan then," I say.

Silence...

I'm waiting for her to show me her true colours.

But she disappoints me;

"Don't worry, we will see what we can do. Just focus on getting better and feeding my grandchild," she says.

I'm ready to faint because even multiple Oscar-winning actors can't pull this one. I'm tempted to call her out, but I remember

what Zothani said. I shouldn't act while I'm still angry, I won't raise any suspicions or sell my dad out, I will deal with this cautiously.

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NONDUMEZULU

I had a long day at work, Nkalipho came to pick me up and drove me home to change and take Nzuzo for our picnic date. I was tired, I didn't want to go, but he begged and insisted it will be a breath of fresh air.

He brought us to Sithebe Crossing, there's a good picnic spot, it's also empty because

it's a weekday. He sets up our picnic, I have a bunch of flowers and a few gift bags I've just been given. I'm happy, don't get me wrong. My emotions have just been misplaced ever since I got that interview email. It's like waiting for another disappointment, I will buy a cute outfit and do my hair and save transport fare, all for nothing. They will give the job to someone else, it has happened a million times before.

He can see that I'm not okay, he's still making sure that Nzuzo is sorted with his food and toys. I should be taking pictures but I'm just sitting flat on my ass watching them. I haven't eaten a single thing, I had my lunch late.

My phone rings, I answer it while they fix the broken toy truck.

“Hi” I didn’t even check who it was.

“Hi Nondu, you’re talking to Solwazi.”

Maybe this is another reason why I’ve been feeling down the whole day.

“What do you want?” I ask without raising my voice. I don’t want to ruin this moment for Nkalipho and Nzuzo, they’re having fun.

“I want us to talk about the boy,” he says.

“His name is Nzuzo. What’s there to talk about?”

“He’s mine, right?”

“You said he wasn’t.”

“But he is, isn’t?”

“I don’t know if a miracle changed his blood and made him yours, so you’re asking a wrong person,” I say.

“Can we meet and talk? If possible, it can be arranged between the families, I know time has passed, there’s a lot that needs to be fixed first, I can’t just come back and...”

“I’m not interested in this conversation, I’m over it, you can arrange and talk to my mother,” I tell him.

“Can I call again some time next week? I’d like to talk to her.”

“Okay,” I’m only this calm because I have two people I care about around.

“How is the boy...I mean Nzuzo?”

“He’s alive,” I end the call.

I gave him over two minutes of my time, that was generous of me because he deserves absolutely nothing. I wonder where they got my number and why they are only reaching out now. I just got in a relationship, my boyfriend is the best uncle to my son, I don't need that son of a bitch waltzing into his life after 8 years. It doesn't work like that.

“Are you okay?” Nkalipho asks lowering down to have a seat next to me. Nzuzo is playing in front of us, the way he's grown fond of Nkalipho scares me. This is the first man I've ever introduced to his life, there's a side of him I've never seen before Nkalipho came along. Boys are boys, hey.

I look at him and smile. “I’m okay, did you fix the truck Mr Engineer?”

“Yeah, it’s good to be on the road again.”

I laugh, but it dies shortly.

Silence fills the space between us.

I keep my eyes away from him. I hate that I’m bringing this energy after all the efforts he made for us to have this family-like outing.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

I nod and let out a deep breath.

“I’m worried about the interview,” I say.

“Why?” he asks.

“I’ve been to interviews Nkalipho,, not even once have I gotten the job except for

this current one. I had already healed from my past disappointments, I don't know if I can handle another one," I say.

He throws his arm around me. A soft kiss lands on my cheek.

"How can I help and make you feel better?" I ask.

"You're so sweet. But I don't think you can help with anything, maybe just a prayer and being my driver on the day," I say.

"That's compulsory snqandamathe sami," he says.

I laugh and bury my face on his shoulder.

Why did I introduce that term to our relationship? He dips a strawberry in the bowl of yogurt and feeds me. I'm not sure how wide I'm supposed to open my mouth.

Do I bite the whole thing or just a small piece and keep it fancy?

There's some yogurt on my lip; he wipes it with his tongue. I can't help, I grab his face and kiss him. Then we remember, both of us at once. We break the kiss and look at him; he's watching us.

He doesn't say anything. Strange!

He looks down at his truck and plays again.

“Do you think we have been promoted from cheek kisses?”

“Let's do it again and see.” I just want another kiss, he's a good kisser and he always smells good. We kiss again, more passionate and deep.

We look up, he's watching us again.

This time I ask, “Did we break the rule?”

“No,” he says.

We’ve been promoted!

“Come and give mommy a kiss to,” I say.

“No,” he says.

Nkalipho laughs. His one-word answers are always hilarious because he never laughs or cares how they get to you. After that no he gave no reason, just went on with his truck racing on the grass.

“So what if I get the job? I will have to move to somewhere closer to my workplace?” I ask, dipping a strawberry in the yogurt and feeding him. My eyes lock with his as he bites, my heart beats rapidly for a second. Yoh, I’m in love.

“At least it’s not Cape Town, I can always come and visit you, Umhlali is just around the corner,” he says.

“What do you mean it’s not Cape Town?” I ask wiping yogurt from his lower lip.

“Someone I once talked to sent me a post, but it was in Cape Town, that was just too far for me,” he says and grabs a bottle of champagne.

“A job post for me or you?” I’m confused.

He lifts his eyes, “For you, I told him about...wait, don’t tell me you’re going to be angry about it. Cape Town babe, that’s too far.”

“I’m struggling, which part of that don’t you get?”

“Something else was going to come up, I have people in contact with health sectors and government laboratories, when something comes up I’d be the first one to know.”

“And you’d still decide where it’s good for me to go and where I can’t go, just so you can have someone you fuck closer to you?”

“That’s not true Nondu, I wasn’t being selfish or anything, and you’re not just someone I fuck,” he says.

I stand and put my slops on.

“I will be in the car,” I tell him.

“Really Ndume? I did all this for us and you’re just walking away over...”

I turn back and look at him. “Over a shot to a decent life that I could’ve gotten had you put me first.”

That’s it, I’m not partaking in this.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 28

NONDUMEZULU

We are going back home, in silence. They started packing shortly after I walked away. A part of me regrets it because Nzuzo was still enjoying himself. But I still

think it was selfish of Nkalipho to not tell me about the job and just turn it down without giving me a chance to give it a try. I think if there's one thing he's known about me since day one, it's my struggle with the right employment. He knows I've been desperate for a job, when Masentle asked him to do something I was hopeful. I didn't know he'd turn around and pick which job is good for me and what distance I should be from home.

We are outside my home in less than 20 minutes, he's pulling up just a few yards away from my gate. Nzuzo can walk from here to the gate, these are his streets.

Nkalipho gets his bag from the back and a plastic of his goodies and leans by the door

watching him go. I'm still sitting inside the car because I know we have to squash it before separating for the night. I love him, I wouldn't want him to go to bed sad because of me, I know he deals with too much during the late hours of the day.

Once Nzuzo disappears he gets back inside the car.

He releases a deep breath and leans back on the seat with his hands clasped behind his head. He's not looking at me, seemingly not willing to say the first word.

"I'm hurt," I tell him.

"Is that why you're fighting me with in front of your son? Making me look bad."

“Don’t you see anything wrong with what you did?” I’m confused, he’s turned this around and became mad at me instead of being remorseful.

“You’re not perfect either Nondu, but I’ve never fought you and walked away from you. If I did, kindly remind me of the day and time. You could’ve just told me I was wrong and advised me how I should do things in the future. This thing of fighting me like an enemy...we are still new in this, I haven’t refused to learn.” He exhales softly and sits leaning closer to the steering wheel.

“Are we really going to discuss my reaction and ignore the real issue?” I’m puzzled.

“I said I’m sorry, I thought I was doing the right thing for us. Would you have really considered moving to Cape Town and leaving me here?”

Is this even a real question?

“Yes, we are not conjoined twins, we are dating and distance has never come between two people who love each other,” I say.

He shakes his head, “I don’t want a long-distance relationship.”

“So you’d rather have me working as a cashier at the mall, as long as you get me whenever your body desires?” I ask.

“Why do you keep talking as if I’m with you just for sex? You and I haven’t even done anything,” he asks.

I'm not sure what he's implying by saying we haven't done anything. Should I be offended? I don't know if it means he didn't feel me or just didn't consider what I gave him a sexual intercourse.

"I can get sex from anyone, you are not the only woman in the world who can give sex. It's very dumb to think that I'm with you for something that a million other woman have," he pins the last nail in the coffin.

I gather my small purse, that's all I came to this car with.

"You're walking away again?" he asks.

I open the door and climb out. I'm walking on the side of the road, trying to be fast as I can. He starts the car and slowly drives next to me with the window rolled down.

“Get inside the Nondumezulu, we are not done talking.”

Me getting back inside the car means the fight continues. I don't want to fight with him, I've had a day long enough.

“Nondu!” he calls.

He's opened the door, driving with one hand and his face peeking out. I don't know if this is a safe way to drive.

I look at him, “We will talk later.”

“No, now. You have an issue with me, let's address it.”

“I don't have any issue with you.”

“Then why are you leaving me?”

“I'm tired of arguing.”

“I said I'm sorry.”

His sorry doesn't sound apologetic. Did he even say it? When?

"I don't want you to be sorry," I tell him.

"Oh okay, you just want to fight with me in front of Nzuzo and sit in the car while I'm trying to spend time with you and him? Is this how things are going to be Nondu?

Everytime I make a mistake you're going to leave?"

I'm almost at my gate, I have to stop and give him attention. I don't think he's going to leave, he doesn't get how he's wrong in all of this, it's just my reaction that is bad.

"Ma asked you not to park in front of the gate," I remind him, standing with my purse clutched on my chest and legs crossed on the pavement.

“Then get in the car, I will go and park away.” He says it like he’s doing me a favor by that. I didn’t see him as the stubborn type, I’m not sure what my next move is.

“Does it tickle you when things are not okay between?” he asks.

I take a deep breath and look at the gate I’m going to and the car he wants me to get in. Same distance.

“We will talk later,” I tell him.

“What is it that you’re going to tell me later that you can’t tell me now?”

“You will be calm later, so will I,” I say.

“I’m calm, I just need you to come to the car. Your flowers are here, I bought you gifts and food and you’re just leaving everything here,” he says.

I don't know if he's going to drive off if I walk inside the gate or he's going to pull a crazy stunt. I don't know what I'm dealing with, he's so calm yet driving after me with his body leaning out of the car and one hand on the steering wheel.

I decide to obey and go back inside the car.

He reverses so that he's not directly parked to my gate.

Then he stops the car and looks at me, very calm.

“What can I do to make things okay?”

“I'm not angry anymore, I just want to go home and rest, and for you to do the same.

We will talk later or in the morning,” I say.

“I want us to talk now,” he says.

I'm not getting what I want here; it's his word or no word.

“What do you want us to talk about? Let's leave the Cape Town thing, I do have a job interview coming up, I will focus on that.”

One has to take a below seat, otherwise we will be on this road the whole evening.

A moment of silence passes, then he gently grabs my hand.

“I love you, please don't ever doubt that,” he says.

“I know, I love you too.” Our eyes lock, for a minute we are just staring at each other.

Then he looks away, I do the same.

“Who was calling you?” he asks.

I know which call he's talking about, I just didn't expect him to ask.

“When?” I ask.

“When we were at the picnic.”

“Nzuzo’s father,” I tell him even though I wasn’t aware that we question each other’s incoming phone calls now.

“Oh okay,” he says.

“It was the first time he calls me in 8 years, I didn’t want to create any scene because Nzuzo was there. I told him to communicate with my mother if he suddenly has a DNA similar to Nzuzo’s,” I explain. I felt the need to, I know a thing or two about Nkalipho now.

“What did you tell Nzuzo about his father?” he asks.

I shrug, “He’s never asked me about him. I was going to address it when he starts asking questions.”

“Okay,” he says.

His one-word answers aren’t hilarious or satisfying, they just give me mixed feelings.

I wait for him to talk, but he doesn’t.

We sit in silence, both wrapped in our thoughts. I know I cannot let this arising child issue between me and Solwazi get into my head. It will definitely mess my emotions up and that will affect me as a mother and a girlfriend. My mother has to handle it, I trust her to do the right thing, she’s been there since day one, she witnessed it all.

“We should go to church this coming Sunday,” he says randomly.

I snap out of my thoughts and look at him. He’s serious.

I nod, “Definitely.”

“Is your mother going to have a problem if you take the food with you? Nzuzo didn’t get the time to eat,” he asks.

My subconscious nudges me, I was selfish for walking away like that and ending the picnic. I need to make it up to them.

“My mom is unpredictable, but I will take it,” I say and start gathering my gift bags and flowers. People will know that a man bought me these, I’m carrying a bunch of bags including Nzuzo’s food.

He opens the door for me, I'm not sure if we are just pretending to be okay or really okay. He pecks the side of my face and stares down at me. I'm trying to figure out where he's at but he's just...plain.

"Please drive safely," I say.

His lip curves into a thin smile, he nods.

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My mother doesn't seem to mind me coming home with a bunch of flowers and half a grocery of goodies. With her you'd never know, but I kept everything in the kitchen, just in case she wants to have a strawberry or something.

I sit next to her with a bowl of yogurt. Our channels have been unblocked, she's watching a true crime show. I didn't know she had an interest in such, it's my first time seeing her this interested in people murdering each other.

"I hope you are not planning to kill someone," I say.

"MaMbhele recommended this, we have to pray about things we know of."

"But these aren't even happening in South Africa, how about you pray for me to get the job I'm going to an interview for?"

"I hope you're not going around telling people about it," she turns to me with a raised eyebrow.

“No, I haven’t told anyone except you, Aunt Teekay and...and Nkalipho.”

“Good then. So why are you back this early from wherever you’ve been doing ungodly things?” She’s looking at me, her eyes sparked with curiosity.

“We fought,” I shrug.

“Is your relationship not new?”

“It is,” I say with a low sigh.

“Then what is the matter?”

Uuuh, I didn’t know she’d be this concerned about my ungodly relationship.

“We sorted it out, it wasn’t something serious. But one serious thing that happened is Solwazi’s call. He wants to talk about Nzuzo,” I say.

“Why now?” she asks exactly what I’ve been asking myself.

“I have no idea, all I know is that I don’t have the energy to go there with him. I asked him to talk to you, I just want to focus on Nzuzo and Nkalipho.” Last part, oops.

“Yeah, he should call me. Nzuzo is 8 years old, I begged even his mother to just acknowledge the child, but they refused saying the so-called Solwazi didn’t make you pregnant.” She’s fuming, Solwazi has another thing coming.

My bowl is empty, I stand and ask if she wants anything, and by anything I mean some of my goodies. “I have some fruits.”

“No, thank you,” she says.

“Juice?” I ask.

“Nondumezulu eat those things alone, I won’t eat ukudla kwemjolo yakho!”

But the TV she’s watching was paid for by that mjolo money. Whatever makes her feel good! Nzuzo and I will have our goodies.

“Sunday I’m going to church,” I say making my way to the kitchen.

“Really? MaMbhele will be so happy.”

I laugh, “Not your church, I’m going with Nkalipho to his aunt’s church.”

“Oh, pray for your relationship there, it’s too early for you two to fight.”

Okay, my mother is a shipper, she wants this ship to sail more than anyone.

I'm in a better mood going to bed. It's strange that Nkalipho hasn't called me yet, it's almost 9pm, surely he's gone to bed by now. I will call him instead of waiting.

His phone rings unanswered.

I try a couple of times, still nothing.

I check his last-seen on Whatsapp and he hasn't logged in since 1pm, that was before we went to the picnic. My mind immediately goes to what he said, in a few words he basically told me he can get any woman he wants for sex. Now I'm wondering if that's the case, or he just forgot to call me. But I sleep, not letting my insecurities get better of me.

I don't know what time it is, I wake up calling my father. I saw him sitting next to me, trying to hold my hand, for some reason he couldn't even though he was closer to me. This is the first time I've ever dreamed of him. I'm between happy and sad; happy that he visited because I've been praying for it, but then he didn't hold my hand.

I check the time, it's 3:26am. I have to go back to sleep, maybe he will visit again and this time he will be able to hold my hand. I've missed him so much.

Unfortunately he didn't come back, I wake up and tell my mother about it. I think it means something, soon he will be an

ancestor to us that we expect him to be.

Whatever Aunt Teekay is doing where she is, she needs to go harder. I can't believe I hated one person who almost died for me. I have to wake Nzuzo up and get him ready for school.

I find him fast asleep in his bed, which isn't like him at all, he's usually up at this time.

As soon as I touch him I feel that his temperature is high. His whole body is hot.

He had a lot of sweets yesterday before bed, now we are here, phewww.

"Maaaa," I yell.

Grandmothers are self-trained doctors, more experienced than us. I'm in need of her advice; do I ask her to take him to the clinic or she will deal with this with

Sunlight, warm water and enema bulb syringe?

She's here within a minute, unlike me who had to get closer and put my hand on the side of his head, she sees that he's sick from the door.

"I knew it would end like this," she says.

"His temperature is high," I say.

Nzuzo wakes up hearing the commotion around him. His eyes are bloodshot, he starts coughing and sneezing. I should've left those chocolates in the car.

"Are you okay baby?" I ask.

Waterfall!

He's going to be crying the whole day-ke, that's a sick Nzuzo for you.

I hurry and get a Panado, that should block the pain for a while.

I won't be able to function at work today, being a mom is harder on days like this. I can't report absent because on Wednesday I have an interview to attend, that would be too many days absent, I'm not irreplaceable.

My mother attends to Nzuzo, I will leave them taxi fare, just in case she decides to take him to the clinic. I'm running a bit late, I don't have time to comb my hair, I wrap a doek around my head and get in my work uniform. Then I remember that Nkalipho and I haven't spoken since

yesterday. He has neither texted nor called me back.

This is strange. I try him again, now his phone no longer goes through.

I have Masentle's number. As much as I hate being that girlfriend who annoys people asking her boyfriend's whereabouts, I have no choice but to call her.

She answers just after a few rings, I hope I'm not disturbing her rich housewife morning.

"Good morning Masentle," I sound a bit formal.

"Hey gorgeous, good morning." She's already full of energy and charm.

"I'm kind of troubling you for silly reasons. I've been trying to get hold of Nkalipho

since last night, he didn't answer and now his phone is off," I say.

"Oh, Nkalipho. He's okay yazi, he's actually good, he will call you back as soon as he can," she says.

I'm not satisfied with her response, she's saying something but not telling me anything.

"Where is he?" I ask.

"His father is with him. They will get ready for work."

"Why is his phone off?" I'm interrogating here, something is off in all that she's saying.

"I will let him know that you're looking for him. I'm sure his battery is dead."

I take a deep breath and ask, “Did he get there and drink?”

“He has it under control Nondu, please just understand that he’s been through a lot. He’s actually 100 times better than he was a year ago, he went to rehab, he’s actively working on becoming a better man,” she says.

So he’s an alcoholic? I asked Nkalipho this and he denied it. I’m disappointed, how drunk was he that at 9pm he couldn’t hear his phone ringing and he still hasn’t been able to check his messages?

I’m already having an awful day and it’s not even 8 o’clock yet!

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 29

NONDUMEZULU

I haven't seen Nkalipho since the picnic day. He texts in the mornings and before he goes to bed, we just never speak over the phone anymore. I haven't tried to call, I don't know if he'd pick up, I feel like he's going through something and needs space. I'm not sure if I'm part of that something, I believe he will talk to me when he's ready. I don't remember saying anything bad to him, I left voice-notes telling him I love him, I told him I was sorry about the picnic

and asked for a chance to make it up to him. He hasn't responded to those, he just copies and pastes those 'good morning my love' messages and sends me, and does the same to wish me good nights.

I won't lie and say I'm not stressed. Mjolo has me by tits, sometimes I go to bed without eating. I miss him like crazy but I'm not going to run after him while I don't even know what's going on. Tomorrow we are supposed to go to church together, I'm not sure if that's still happening since there hasn't been much of communication lately.

"Mommy, mommy!" He running inside my bedroom, screaming my name. It's not

even 8 in the morning, can't I enjoy my day-off?

"Hey baby, why are you not in bed? It's cold," I ask.

He just recovered from his flue, I don't want another round of sleepless nights and his endless tears. I had to get extra medication from the pharmacy after my mother took him to the clinic, it was that bad.

"It's Saturday mommy!" he's not speaking, but screaming.

"Yeah it is, you're not going to school."

"But I'm going to play football," he says.

Oh shucks, today is the Saturday he was invited to a football match for by Salo's babydaddy. He's been excited about it,

before I had a plan on how he was going to get there and who'd keep an eye on him for me, but not anymore .

“I will call your aunt, go and brush your teeth, I'll make you breakfast,” I say.

I already have a bad feeling about this. Him and I are about to have a big fight, he doesn't take lightly to broken promises. I told him he'd go there, now I'm not in good terms with the person I had a deal with, he can no longer go.

I call Salo, maybe she will make a plan.

“Hey Nondu,” she answers with a yawn.

Too early! I forget that she's pregnant.

“Hey sisi, I’m calling regarding the football thing that’s happening today. I don’t have someone who can bring Nzuzo there,” I say.

“Do you need someone to come and pick him up?” she asks.

“No, I preferred Nkalipho because they’re close, you know how handful your nephew can be,” I say.

“Oh yeah, only if I was going to be there as well. Don’t worry, I will tell Zothani that he’s no longer coming,” she still sounds sleepy.

“Alright, thank you, have a great day.” I end the call and release a deep breath. I have to break the news to Nzuzo, help me Lord.

I wake up and wash my face and go to the kitchen to make him a bowl of cereal. He comes with his teeth brushed and face washed and lotioned. Well, not the whole face, only the middle parts, but still he tried.

“You look handsome, give me a kiss,” I say.

He blows it. Better than nothing, I guess.

“Am I going to put my clothes and go?”

Here we go....

“You cannot go anymore but Aunt Salo promised that you’ll attend the next football match and even play. How is that?”

“Nooooo! I’m going,” he pushes away the bowl. It hits the vase and falls to the floor.

“It was postponed,” I’m lying, I cannot raise my voice or punish him for exploding because I’m at fault.

“No, it was not!” He shakes his head, covers his ears and starts screaming his lungs off.

“I will take you to KFC,” I beg, holding his arms so that he doesn’t roll on the floor and kick things.

“No, football!”

You know what, he can have his moment. I pick the bowl from the floor and put it in the sink and fetch the mop to clean the milk on the floor.

My mother is woken up by the noise, she comes shouting at both of us.

“Ekuseni kusa nje! What have you done to him?” she asks me.

Nzuzo is still on the floor crying.

“He’s angry about the football match he was invited to attend by Salo’s babydaddy.”

She frowns, “Is he no longer going?”

I shake my head and start washing the dishes. I’m not in the mood to give explanations, she did voice her opinions about me introducing Nkalipho to Nzuzo’s life too early. Elders know the best, I shouldn’t have downplayed her advices, look where I am now.

She does her ‘grandma’ tricks to calm him down. After a moment she’s putting him back on his chair.

“Make him another cereal,” she says and leaves.

I look at Nzuzo, he’s still having hiccups, my heart breaks. I have the money, I can take taxis there and leave before the match ends so that we can be home early.

I put another bowl in front of him and kiss his head.

“Eat up, we will go, you and me,” I say.

He looks up, then shakes his head.

“You don’t want to go anymore?” I ask.

He picks his spoon and eats. From friends to foes! He wants me to leave him alone.

I go back to the dishes in the sink.

He finishes and leaves his bowl on the counter. A moody child is exactly what I'm starting my day with. From relationship problems to parenting problems, I can't have peace for a day, just one. I wash his bowl and go back to my room. I will only get out of this bed when I feel hungry, I have nothing to look forward to.

My phone rings as I walk in. I left it here, whoever it is has a great timing.

I look at the screen, my heart almost leaps out of my chest. I haven't had this name calling me in days, I was about to wait for my short good morning text.

I pick up, "Hi."

"Hi," he says.

I have missed hearing his voice. What did I do so wrong to him?

“Are you okay?” I ask, trying to control my wobbly voice.

“I’m okay. Are you?”

“I’m okay,” I’m blatantly lying.

“I’m here,” he says.

My eyes go to the window even though I can’t see the road from the bed.

“Here, where?” I ask.

“Down the road. Is Nzuzo ready?”

I’m not sure what to make of this. I understand he made a promise but we haven’t been talking. Does it make sense for him to want to go somewhere with my son?

“I told him that he’s no longer going,” I say.

“Why is he not going? He was excited about it.”

“Because I thought you were not going to come Nkalipho.”

“Why would I let him down like that? Can you please get him ready, I will wait here.”

I want to ask him where he’s been, what’s been going on, why are things like this between us. But then I remember that as a mother I should just put Nzuzo first.

I go to his room and tell him that Lume is here to pick him up. His face lightens up, he’s interested in going again.

“I will go with the car?” he asks, grabbing his T-shirt off in a hurry.

“Yeah, you will go there with his car.

You’re going to behave, right?”

“Yes mommy, I will kick the ball.”

I think there’s going to be a problem when he realizes that he’s only there to watch.

But that will be for Mr Disappear-and-Appear to solve. I take him to the bathroom and give him a quick bath and put him in his tracksuits and sneakers.

“Go and tell Gogo that you’re leaving while I pack your bag,” I tell him.

He runs off, he’s besides himself with excitement. You’d swear he wasn’t rolling on the floor and deafening us with his screams just a moment ago. He can get carried away when outdoors, I have to

pack him another set of clothes. I pack his water, toilet roll, and his favorite toy truck.

This has been the longest I've gone without communicating or seeing him since we got to know each other. He's outside the car, sitting on the pavement and playing with a piece of stick. He's wearing tracksuits and sneakers too, only different in color and branded.

“Lume buka mina!” – Nzuzo.

I wasn't ready for him to lift his head yet.

He looks up, smiles as Nzuzo runs to show him that they're both wearing tracksuits.

He avoids eye contact with me at all costs, even when I greet and ask how he's doing.

He's playing with Nzuzo while answering me.

The car doors are not locked.

"Nzuzo go to car," I say.

He goes and opens the passenger door for Nzuzo.

Then it's me and him; I'm staring at him, his eyes are running away.

"What's going on between us?" I'm straightforward, he's given me enough stress.

"Nothing, siyathandana nje," he's acting clueless.

"Siyathandana? Do you mean texting each other CnP messages twice a day? That's how you want our relationship to be?"

“Don’t shout Nondu, this is why it’s hard for me to talk to you.”

What???

“I’m not shouting,” I say, puzzled.

“I was scared, Masentle told me you called and she told you the truth. Yeah, I have an addiction, I’m working on it,” he says.

“What were you scared of? That’s what I don’t understand because you’ve gotten drunk in front of me before. All I wanted from you was a call apologizing for not picking up my calls. Not you to just go MIA.”

“I was scared you’d ask us to take a break,” he says.

I just...I have to take a deep breath and look at this the way he was looking at it.

“I won’t ask that after you ignored me?”

His reasoning makes zero sense.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“It’s fine, we will do things however you want them. If it’s twice messages a day, then that’s what we will do.” I hand him Nzuzo’s bag. I’m acting strong but my heart is sore. He’s not helping me trust him. Who ignores a person because they’re scared? I feel like he’s not telling me the real truth here. His face is worn out, it shows that he hasn’t been having enough rest for a couple of days.

“That’s not what I want,” he says.

I take a deep breath and look at him.

“What do you want Nkalipho?”

“I want you to love me openly and unconditionally.”

“I already do,” I say.

“Then do it more, I cannot see it. I don’t know if you’re still trying to get to know me or you’re an emotional-unavailable type of lover. I want to be able to trust you more than I trust a bottle of Johnnie Walker.”

Hhayi-ke!

“So you want me to compete with alcohol?” I mean, they’ve been together longer than him and I. Other girls are competing with slay-queens and I have to outshine a bottle of Johnnie Walker!

“That’s not what I mean, it’s okay if you don’t understand. I have to go, we will get late.”

“Look,” I say.

He stops and looks at me.

“I genuinely do love you. I haven’t been coping, you didn’t say anything, you just...I also have things I’m dealing with Nkalipho. Let’s focus on what makes us happy than our individual sorrows, I really want us to work.”

He comes back to me, I’ve allowed my emotions to bury the strong woman that I am.

“I want us to work too, I’ve never fallen for a woman the way I’ve fallen in love with you. When I say I’m scared of losing you I mean it.” He’s hugging me, there’s that sense of belonging and safety in his arms. I

rest my head on his chest, I've forgotten that we are in public.

"I miss you so much Nkalipho," I'm vulnerable today.

"Let's spend time together later, just you and I and the beats of our hearts."

Can it be later already? I want my man, now.

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#Narrated

Two teams are out, now it's between Thunder Runners and Team Blue Allies from Melville. Dlomo was disappointed to

see his team lose even after making three substitutions with his trusted players.

Zothani couldn't stop smiling because he knew from the beginning that no team stood a chance against Team Blue Allies.

All the coaches are standing on the side of the pitch, Nkalipho and the bored Nzuzo are seated on the second row. Nkalipho has canceled juice and all the sweets, he's forcing him to drink lots of water because the sun is out and scorching.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"No," – Nzuzo. He's lying on his lap, he didn't expect this number of people and noise.

"Burger and chips?" Nkalipho asks.

"No," he says.

Very hard to deal with. By counting hours he knows that Nzuzo is probably hungry by now.

“What do you want to do?” he asks.

“I want to play the ball,” Nzuzo says.

Obviously, he’s not trained to play. But luckily Nkalipho did come with a ball, just in case he wanted to bounce it or kick it on the side of the field. They go to the car and fetch it.

On their way back a group of boys spot them, they wave at Nzuzo.

“Wave back,” Nkalipho tells him.

He does so, the boys run towards them, they’re all around his age.

They're asking about the ball, if he owns it and wants to play with them. That's how he gets new friends and abandon his Lume for the rest of the match.

Team Blue Allies meet the expectations of Zothani, they are the ones to lift the cup and win the prizes from three sponsors, which Dlomo was a part of. Him and Zothani are not friends but they share the same love of sports. After briefly chatting and shaking hands, he looks for his boys. Every coach gathers their team for refreshments. Nzuzo is with Rangers United, the young boys from his hometown, they're playing with the new ball that 'his father' got him. When Dlomo walks up to

them he immediately knows who he is. He's a spitting image of his mother. A part of him wants to run and disappear, like he's always done. But the time has come, he cannot keep running away from his blood. This is his only son, he walks on until he's standing right in front of the little boy.

Nzuzo recognizes him from the KFC incident, he immediately takes two steps back.

"Hey Nzuzo," he says bending down to hold his little hand.

Nzuzo doesn't answer, he's holding his ball under his arm, staring at him widely.

Dlomo clears his throat, "Who are you with here?"

Nzuzo turns and points at Nkalipho, he's making his way towards them.

Solwazi stands up straight, his heart is racing, his breath is uneven.

“Moja,” he says pulling out his fist.

Nkalipho pulls Nzuzo and looks at him, trying to locate the face.

“The coach of the first losing team, right?”

“Ah man, don't mention it. Are you about to leave?”

“Yeah, we have to,” Nkalipho says brushing Nzuzo's head.

“He's been playing with my boys, I wanted to go with them for refreshments, I made a booking in the nearby restaurant,” he says.

“No, he’s a bit moody today. But thanks for the offer,” - Nkalipho.

“You can come with us, I just want to...I want them to spend more time together,” he’s referring to the team.

One boy asks Nzuzo to pass the ball. He does, they start playing again.

Out of desperation Dlomo offers to go and pick the food and ‘other stuff’ while Nkalipho looks over them as they continue playing.

It takes him over 15 minutes to come back. Nzuzo is having a time of his life, his new friends are teaching him the knee juggle tricks and stalls. When Dlomo comes back he’s bringing more than just food, he has some clothing shopping bags too.

“This is for him, I got him a pair of cleats and sport wear,” he tells Nkalipho, dumping a couple of bags in front of Nzuzo.

“That was not necessary, he doesn’t need this,” Nkalipho says, puzzled.

“I love him, please let him have it, it’s really nothing. I have done the same for all the boys in my team,” he begs.

Nzuzo peeps through one of the bag and looks at Nkalipho with a huge grin. He’s happy, he knows these are for him, Nkalipho can’t say no now. His happiness should be put first.

“I will tell mommy that you are not mean,” he says to Dlomo . His face bright and full of joy.

Dlomo smiles, folds his fist and bumps it into his little one. It's there, infrangible and unbreakable, the father and son blood connection.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 30

NONDUMEZULU

I hear him chatting loudly in the car, I know he had a good day. It's around 4pm, I thought Nkalipho would bring him earlier, but it's still okay because there's no school

tomorrow anyway. I open Nzuzo's door, he screams my name and jumps out.

"I have a ball mommy!" He's over the moon.

I smile, my arms are folded, I'm watching him offload everything that he got from this trip. He received some gifts as well, he tells me the coach is not a bad man, apparently a certain coach bought him soccer boots and other sporty clothes. He's rushing in to show his grandmother. I get inside the car after watching him walk through the gate.

Nkalipho and I did talk and iron things out before they left, so I go for a kiss before saying anything.

He smiles, "Were you missing me?"

"I was, I missed you so much."

“Then show me, not this baby kiss you just gave me.”

I laugh and lean closer to his face, we kiss again.

“I didn’t feel it, more please,” he says. So needy!

I pull my face, he just chuckles and leans closer. Then he gives me the KISS, he’s capturing everything; my lips, soul and heart. The deeper he kisses me, the tighter he tries to squeeze my boobs under the dress. His hand drops to the dress, he lifts it up and sneaks his hand into my undies. It’s rather quick and less expected.

I pull back and look at him. It’s not like we are in the suburbs and the streets are

empty, we are in the township, on road just below my gate.

“Slow down,” I say.

“It’s been a week, ngikhumbule igqe yami,” he says in a hoarse voice and licks his lower lip. Nkalipho is a sexy MF, that’s why it’s hard to put my foot down with him sometimes.

“We can’t here, people will see us.” Jeez, I sound like a scared little girl.

“Let’s go, I will bring you back before 7pm,” he says.

“I have to ask my mom, you know how she is. Are you sure it will be before 7pm”

“I promise you, we’ll just...you know, fuck and come back.” His lip curves into a little grin as I raise my eyebrows at him. Yes,

that's exactly what I want to happen but I don't want him to say it like it is. I'm his girlfriend, not a fuck-buddy.

"Just say you're fetching something important, I will make sure of the time," he says.

"Okay," I attempt to open the door so that I can hurry and come back to go and get fucked. But he stops me, I look at him and there's that hungry-sexy-horny look on his face.

"Can I see it?" he asks.

"See what?" I know exactly what he's talking about because he's staring where it's positioned at, but what kind of request in the world is that?

"No," I say.

“Okay, go,” he says, smirking.

“Your mind is so dirty Nkalipho, I don’t know what’s going to help you.” I laugh and climb out of the car shaking my head.

It’s just for tradition now, I think my mother knows that if a car stops somewhere nearby and I receive a phone call, it means Nkalipho wants to see me. I ask if I can go ‘to the shops’ for 2 hours- just extending the time so that I don’t get in trouble if Nkalipho takes longer to cum.

“Make sure you use condom in those shops you’re going to,” she says.

I’m astounded. Aunt Teekay, I wouldn’t really be shocked because she calls a spade

a spade. But my mother is so confusing these days, she just speaks from her head.

She lifts her eyes to me. “Go, I will look after Nzuzo.”

I didn't think I'd go somewhere, I hurry to my room to change my underwear and spray some perfume. I lift my dress up in front of the mirror to see how sexy I look; I'm in new panties. I tick all the boxes of a sexy woman. Someone's son is about to get serviced!

Nzuzo is still going on and on about his new ball. Some things you just miss as a female parent, I've never thought of buying him a ball, I just buy him plastic cars and sticker books. I don't tell him that I'm leaving with Nkalipho, I tell him I'm going

to the shops, which means I have to come back with something, even if it's just a lollipop. God bless my mother's heart, I can't believe I'm old enough to be allowed to leave with my boyfriend easy like this, I bid them goodbye and leave.

We drive straight to his house, there's no 'buts' and 'ifs', I know I'm getting in there, getting fucked and driven back home. Once we are inside the door he holds my hand, we grab bottles of water and head to his bedroom.

"When do you plan to visit me?" he asks, taking off his jacket.

"Invite me, I can't just show up," I say.

“You can. Must I give you the spare keys?”

He takes the T-shirt off, I notice that he has some dark bruises on his back. I don't ask about them but I do have some questions, a lot of them in the my head. I feel like I know his demons on the surface level, he's got deeper issues and his family is well aware, just downplaying them for whatever reasons.

He turns and looks at me. “Huh?”

I look away from his body, “No, I don't need spare keys, I will only come here if you're here.”

“But I want you to have them.” He turns around and pulls me to the bed, he's topless. He puts me on his lap and entwines his fingers into mine.

“The house is not the same without you. I didn’t think someone I’ve known for such a short period of time can have such a huge impact on my life. I cannot remember what kept me going and happy before you; my past is just blank.”

“But you could go for days without talking to me?” Forgiven doesn’t mean forgetting, I’m still going to bring it up in our conversations.

“Memories kept me going, there wasn’t an hour that passed by where I wasn’t thinking of you Nondu.” He traces my jawline with his two fingers and slowly pulls me down to his face. Our lips lock, we are kissing slowly, he’s gently turning me around and putting me on the bed on my back.

He drags my panty down to my ankles in one pull and pushes my leg to the far end to fit in between my thighs. Didn't even notice that it's a brand new panty. He comes down to my lips again, this time he's more passionate and deep. Feeling his shaft growing hard with each feel, I get moist between my folds and respond with more passion to the kiss.

He moves his lips down to my neck, I start moaning more audibly. His fingers tap between my folds and rubs over my clit a few times.

"I missed you baby," he says with a shaky breath and then stands. He's getting a

condom, it takes a split second for him to fit it in and gets on top of me again.

I feel his finger inside me, I'm wet but not there yet. I need more of his play. I have to need him. He squeezes my thighs and pushes his head down on me.

“Babyyyy!” I hold his head and throw mine back. It feels good. I want him to stay there until I reach breaking point. But he was just getting me wetter, as I begin to tremble he penetrates me in one long push and buries every inch of his dick inside me.

I'm not a virgin, but a little patience goes a long way.

“Sus' isandla sthandwa,” he says, forcefully removing my hand from my mound.

Okay, shoulders down! I let my body relax, the intensity is growing with every stroke. He's enjoying every second of it, his groans are evident of it.

It's a run, he chases his orgasm until he reaches it.

“Yeaaaaaah!” he groans with satisfaction and rests on my chest, sweating and panting heavily. When he pulls out I feel warm fluid running down to my buttocks. I know I didn't cum, that's not from my wetness either.

“Nkalipho!” I lift my head and look at him.

“Ngizoyilungisa baby,” he says.

How is he going to sort it out? Didn't he feel the condom bursting?

“Fuck!” I curse and run to the bathroom.

I wipe myself and pee. Then I stand and jump up and down.

He walks in and comes to me.

“I will buy you the pill tomorrow morning,” he says.

I don't respond, I continue jumping up and down.

“We will go to the doctor and make sure that everything is okay,” he says and holds my right arm. “Stop jumping, let's go and...”

“And do what?” I look at him, eyebrow raised.

“I wasn't done yet. Wena usu-right yini?”

“Right from what Nkalipho? Sex is all about you. You don’t care if you’re hurting me or bursting the condom and cumming inside me.”

He lets go of my arm, his eyes are running away. I’m glaring at him. I’m both sexually frustrated and scared because jumping up and down didn’t clean my womb from his sperms.

“Why are you so rough? I’m your girlfriend, touch me and look at me in the eyes and tell me I look sexy. Don’t just take from me,” I say.

“You don’t have to shout,” he says in a low voice.

I really don't know his definition of shouting. My voice is not even raised, I'm just firm with my words, in a no-harsh way.

I take a deep breath and ask, "Is this it? I have to be home, you know."

He brushes his face and looks at me. I'm not even shy about my displeasure.

He chuckles and tries to hold my hand. I'm not playing with him, he realizes that and the stupid grin on his face disappears.

"Can I make it up to you?" he asks, now looking embarrassed.

"We've already wasted time, let's just go."

"Come on Nondu, don't do me like that, I have too many failures, I don't want your sexual satisfaction to be one of them," he says.

I unfold my arms and release a deep breath. Maybe we can give it another try. I let him hold my hand, he keeps blinking, I know he's embarrassed.

"We can do it your way, I won't be selfish," he's begging.

"Okay, let's just..." I kiss his lips, he kisses me back and wraps his arms around me.

When he releases a deep breath I start to think maybe I was a bit harsh. I don't hear myself when I talk, so it could be that he receives my tone differently.

"What do you like about sex?" I ask, pulling him back to the bedroom.

"The coochie," he says.

As expected!

“I mean from the whole experience,” I say.

“Nutting,” he says with a low chuckle.

I roll my eyes “Obviously! We should try it without penetration first, then when both of us are good we go all the way..”

“Oral?” he asks.

“Yeah, you have to learn sexual patience.”

“Are you trying to respectfully say I cook two-minutes noodles?”

I burst into laughter, I didn’t know men know of that term.

“No, you don’t, you just lack affection during the intercourse, which makes it hard for me to be on the same level as you,” I tell him.

“I’m sorry about that,” he says.

We both sit on the bed, I turn and face him.

“Why do you always say I’m shouting when I speak?” This really bothers me.

“Because you shout, even without raising your voice but it’s still you scolding and biting my head off. Handle me with a bit of care,” he says.

“Yoooh okay, Fragile Glass.”

He laughs, “I don’t mind anyone shouting at me but not you. I don’t want to be scared of you, being constantly shouted at creates fear.”

“I understand, I will try to speak more gently and sultry, look at you in the eyes and whisper into your ears.” He pinches my arm, we both laugh and lie on our backs, hands linked.

“I’m scared now,” he says.

My eyes are on the ceiling, I frown and ask,

“Scared of what?”

“Making the first move.”

I shift my eyes to him. Gosh, he’s serious. I burst into laughter. It does take a brave man to start something he’s not sure he will be able to finish. Right now he knows what my expectations are, he’s not just going to fuck me and go with the wind of pleasure.

“I feel like Rangers United, losing on the first round,” he says.

It’s supposed to be a joke, I guess.

“Rangers United?” That name is a trigger to me.

“The team that was kicked out first, Nzuzo made a few friends with the players and the coach,” he says.

I swear some screws loosen in my head.

“Which coach?” I ask .

“Dlomo, the one who bought him food and soccer boots and...”

I sit, my whole body is shaking. I don’t want to believe that happened.

“He bought Nzuzo those clothes and fucking boots?”

He sits up, he’s confused.

“What’s going on?”

“Solwazi Dlomo, who did you think it was? Some generous coach feeling sorry for a poor black kid? No, ungiwayela amasimba

uSolwazi wakhona!” I need to find my clothes, there’s no way I’m going to let those clothes in my son’s wardrobe.

“He’s Nzuzo’s father? Did you know he was going to be there?” he asks.

“Why would I have let you and my son go and breathe the same air as him? Please dress up, I have to go home,” I say.

“Because of that? This can wait Nondu.”

“No, it can’t, I don’t want those things in my son’s room.”

“Oh okay, can I use the bathroom first?”

He’s not happy with me, but he has to understand how insulted I feel right now. Solwazi thinks he can just show up with a couple of stupid shorts and T-shirts, then everything will be forgotten. I was willing

to give him a chance to plead his case with my mother, but after this he can just forget.

Nkalipho drops me at the gate. He's not happy, I can see it on his face. I'm concerned about what him and Johnnie Walker are going to get up to when he gets back in his house. But I cannot pause my emotions to try and control his relationship with alcohol.

I'm here before 7pm, they're still watching TV.

Nzuzo is not in his pyjamas, but new shorts and the Nike T-shirt.

"You have to take that off," I say walking in.

Mom frowns, “Why are you walking in like a police officer of Apartheid era? He’s going to take them off later, you know how he is when he gets new clothes.”

“No Ma, he won’t wear these expensive rags, ever!” I throw my phone on the couch and lift him up. When I start pulling the T-shirt out that’s when he realizes that I’m taking his new clothes off. A fight breaks...

The whole neighborhood can hear his screams. I pull out the shorts and go to my room to get the new clothes I bought for his birthday. I’d rather have him wear these and start afresh, his birthday is still a few months away.

“Look what I have for you,” I try to cheer him up as I walk back to him with SpiderMan T-shirt and new jeans. They’re actually better than the ones he’s crying for.

He doesn’t even look at them, he cries louder and louder. I’m getting frustrated and tired of begging him. This is not just about clothes, but Solwazi buying his way into my son’s life.

My phone rings, Nkalipho’s name flashes on the screen. I cannot answer his call, not while this child is screaming like this. I can feel my patience running out, I know I will lose it at any minute if he keeps going on like this.

Someone is knocking at the door...

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 31

NONDUMEZULU

In the middle of all the commotion happening here the last person I expected at the door is Nkalipho. I thought he'd driven off after I walked through the gate. My mom is here, he can't just show up.

“What's going on?” He's letting himself inside.

Nzuzo's screams are still deafening. I can't even explain properly.

"Why is he crying like this?" He's interrogating me like a police.

"My mom is home, you have to go," I say.

That just fall on deaf ears, he walks past me, this is about to get dramatic. He's walking in like he's an official somebody here. I'm not ready to face my mother about this mess happening now, I remain standing in the kitchen trying to calm myself down.

I don't know what he's saying there, a few minutes pass with me standing in the kitchen with my breath held.

"Nondu!" my mother yells above the screams.

Well, I have to go there and face whatever it is. I walk in, Nzuzo is still crying, just not as loud. Nkalipho is sitting next to him, on the other couch is my mother.

“Talk to her, maybe she will hear you, they’re just clothes,” she says.

I feel betrayed that her out of all people doesn’t understand why I’m angry and unable to tolerate Nzuzo putting those clothes on. How am I a bad person in all this?

“Give him his clothes,” Nkalipho says in a demanding tone.

I show him the clothes I bought for Nzuzo’s birthday. I don’t trust myself to speak.

They’re gathered here thinking I love hearing my son cry. They think I want to be

in this position. They think I love it when I get worked up and lose my cool. I'm not a crazy woman, I've never been one.

“Can I talk to her privately?” he asks my mother.

She nods.

I don't know when did they become friends. He stands and calls me to the side. Nzuzo wants to tail along but my mother holds him. I take the clothes I took off him and go to the kitchen with Nkalipho.

He's judging me, I can see the way he's looking at me, he thinks I'm crazy.

He stands across the counter, I open the drawer in front of me and take out a scissor.

“Nondu don’t!” he says.

I’m going to cut these clothes, I don’t want to have another fight with Nzuzo over them, it’s better they don’t exist at all. I cut the T-shirt first, I’m still going to get others from his room.

“It’s your son’s clothes, you’re not hurting Dlomo but him,” he says.

“Nkalipho you’ve never had a man impregnates you and deny the child. Then after you’ve raised that child on your own for 8 years he buys your son some stupid clothes without talking to you.” I’m cutting the T-shirt into pieces, not looking at him. I know he’s looking at me like I’m a woman who’s lost her mind, which I’m...

“I’m not going to let you do this.” He grabs me by shoulders and fights me for the scissor.

“Nkalipho you’re in my father’s house,” I warn him. How dare he fights with me in my own home! Fighting me for what? It hasn’t been even a year, he hasn’t seen quarter of my struggles.

“I could hear his screams from the road. What is wrong with you? Are you still in love with him?” he asks.

I stop fighting him and let go of the scissor.

“What did you say?” How did he even put that sentence together?

“The only person you can hurt people that you love for is someone you care about.

Nzuzo is your son, I’m your boyfriend, but

both of us are going to have bleeding hearts tonight because of Dlomo. Explain that to me, how does that make sense?”

“Of course this is about you as well! Being your girlfriend and being Nzuzo’s mom doesn’t block me from the pain Solwazi has put me through. Call me bitter if you want, but my son is not going to wear these expensive rags.”

“You are bitter, thank you for allowing me to use the word. You don’t care about anyone’s feelings but yours. You’re selfish, self-centered and bitter.” Whoooah! That was a rain of insults that I didn’t see coming.

“Then why are you here?” I ask.

“I’m here for Nzuzo, an innocent boy who’s a victim of the heartbreak you got 100 years ago,” he says.

He’s overstayed his welcome.

“Get out!” I point him to the door.

“You didn’t invite me here, you don’t get to kick me out.” He throws the scissor to me, it lands with the sharper side on my wrist.

He can see that I’m hurt but he walks away without acknowledging it. It wasn’t his intention, I’d like to believe, but his lack of remorse angers me.

No, I don’t throw the scissor on his back even though I badly want to. I cover my wrist with a piece of tissue and go to my bedroom.

pass him saying his goodbyes to my mother and the now-calm Nzuzo.

I close the door behind me and throw myself on the bed and cry. I'm not perfect, I have never claimed to be, I don't understand why they're against me and not Solwazi who made things turn out this way.

I'm hurt more by Nkalipho. He was raised by a single mother up to the age of 10. As bad as his mother was, I think he saw her struggles, that's why he's still hurt by her death. He witnessed the pain of a dumped single woman trying to make ends-meet.

How come he doesn't understand my pain?

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I wake up in the morning with a throbbing headache and pain on my wrist. It's a bit swollen where Nkalipho threw the scissor. I check my phone, he hasn't called or sent any apology. I'm not sure what to make of this, he certainly saw the incident happening, the least he could've done is check up on me. I have to wake up and see how Nzuzo is doing. My head is a bit clear, I know I overreacted. I could've waited for him to go to bed before taking the clothes off, especially because his reaction was predictable. I failed to think outside my own box of emotions.

He's in his room with his ball. When he sees me walking in he smiles.

Kids are such innocent souls!

“Hey baby,” I say.

“Hello mommy.”

“Did you sleep well?” I tickle him on the neck

He giggles, “Yeah.”

“You can put your new clothes on after you’ve taken a bath,” I say guiltily.

“Lume said you cut them,” he flaps his little eyes at me.

Guilt grips my heart.

“Only one T-shirt, I will buy another one, exactly the same. I’m sorry I was mean last night,” I say sitting next to him.

“Mommy you still not like the coach?” He’s curiously looking at me.

Only if he knew that he's more than just a coach to him.

"No, I don't," I say.

"You're mean mommy."

I have my first laugh. I do sound mean, and maybe I am to some extent, but the man we are talking about is 100 times worse.

"Let's go and eat breakfast. You want cocoflakes?" I ask, that's how he calls them.

"No, no, burger," he says jumping off the bed.

The burger was bought by Solwazi, I just have to deal with it and go to the kitchen and warm it. I'm forced to do it with a smile on my face.

I warm his burger and plug water for my mother's tea. I feel like even Nkalipho coming here was because of me. I need to apologize for the commotion and the disrespect I showed her yesterday. It's Sunday morning, I don't want her to go to church and report me to her praying mates.

I make the cup of tea and a few slices of butter sandwiches and take it to her bedroom. She's awake, just not out of the bed. The queen has to rest!

"Good morning MaNkosi," I say placing the tray on the bedside table.

"Today you woke up feeling like my child again," she says.

I sigh and sit on the edge of her bed.

“I’m sorry about last night, I was out of line.”

“Totally, I’m glad you are able to see that. Have you spoken to Nkalipho?”

“No,” I say, hoping we’d talk less about him.

“Are you still going to church together?” she asks

“Don’t worry, I will pray here at home,” I say.

She gives me a look, she knows I’m lying, I will probably sleep or just watch TV.

“He looks like an honest boy,” she says.

Honest boy left my wrist aching, so we can agree to disagree.

“He likes Nzuzo so much, that’s the type of a boy I want you to be with.” She’s cheering for a sinking ship. Only the first days were good with him. Now everyday there’s a new fight, it’s emotionally exhausting. We haven’t finished our first trimester and I already feel like I’ve been in this relationship for a decade.

“Don’t let witches win Nondumezulu, there are people who don’t want to see anything good happening for you,” she says.

“It has nothing to do with witchcraft but Nkalipho as a person.”

“Nobody is perfect, try to look at the positive side of things. The boy I saw yesterday deeply cares about you. See, he even invited you to go to church with him,

unlike those ones who took you to clubs,” she says.

“Drink your tea before it gets cold, the kettle uses a lot of electricity.” I sound like her mother, she laughs and shakes her head. I leave before we get deeper into the Nkalipho conversation. I’m not ready to go there yet.

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I didn’t get his message the whole weekend, only Monday evening. I got a text from him asking if I was okay. I didn’t respond, I waited for a text of him acknowledging that he threw a scissor on me and called me names. But it never

came. On Whatsapp he's removed the photo of his car and set a black blank picture as his profile picture. I don't know what it means, I don't have a good feeling about it, I'm just not going to reach out if he doesn't apologize to me.

So far my week has been hectic. As expected, I had a big telephone fight with Solwazi. He passed the phone to his wife and I also told her where to get off. I made it clear that I want him to stay away from my son. Now even my mother is not interested in listening to him, however there's a meeting pending between her and his uncle.

Anyway today is Wednesday, I have an interview at 11am. I'm indifferent about it,

I have put on my ordinary clothes; red top and high-waisted jeans and pencil heels to look a bit formal. My hair is combed to the back and clipped at the end. It's an interview, I'm going to answer whatever they want to know, nothing more or interesting. Nzuzo is back to his normal school routine, he will come back with my neighbor.

I'm not in a good emotional state, I ask my mother to lead the prayer before I leave. Instead of praying she's talking to her late husband. I really cannot count on my father, he visited me once in my dreams and never again. I doubt he's going to help me in any way today and I don't care.

There's a car parked outside, when I walk out of the gate it drives closer. This is South Africa, as a woman you have to always watch out.

The driver hoots, I look at the car and fail to recognize it, so I keep walking.

It comes and stops right next to me. A man I don't know rolls down the window,

"I have been asked to come and take you to Umhlali by Nkalipho Mnguni," he says.

The nerve of that guy!

"No, thank you sir, I'm taking taxis."

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I fail before I even get there. Time,
phewww!

I'm not just a few minutes late, it's 11:43
and I'm still trying to find the building. The
taxi dumped me on the road and drove
other passengers to Ballito. I'm wearing
heels, I'm tired and thirsty. If I wasn't
scared of wasting my mother's prayer I
would've just gone back home because I
already know there's no way they're going
to hire me. With my tons of bad lucks and
now this much disregard of time.

I stop a white family of three on the
pavement to ask for directions. I cannot see
any black people on the road at the
moment.

“Can I ask where Dr Manzini's surgery is?”

For a moment I thought they were about to pull old cards, but the woman is kind enough to direct me. I'm actually closer, just across the road.

I thank them and make my way there. I walk right in, I can't wait to be offered a seat, my knees cannot handle these heels any longer.

The front desk lady looks bored, I greet her and lean by her desk to support my legs.

"I'm here for the interview but I'm one hour late," I say.

"May I please have your name?" she asks.

"Nondumezulu Mhlongo," I say.

It takes a minute for her to go through her computer and find my name on the guest

list or whatever. She looks up and says,

“You’re late.”

“Taxis,” I say.

She stares.

I stare right back. That was a full explanation; taxis.

“You can have a seat while I go check with Dr Manzini.”

Finally, I go to the couch and take my heels off and relax. I’m not crossing my fingers for anything, this is not the first job I’m not going to get, I’ve done this over 10 times, even if they refuse to interview me I wouldn’t care.

I hear the clicks of her stilettos and look up.

Why is she back so soon?

“Can I get you something to drink?” she asks, flashing a bit of a smile.

I didn't think she'd ask, I ask her for still water. I don't know why I traveled without a bottle of water. Umjolo stress makes one do crazy things.

She gives me a sealed bottle of water that I take multiple gulps from before listening to the feedback she got. They're still going to interview me, I just have to wait 5 minutes.

I use that 5 minutes to rest my legs and let the water cool down my throat. I've been in different taxis since morning, I'm drained.

She leads me to the interview room when the time comes. I'm looking forward to nothing more than getting the interview

over and done with. I walk in, the chair I have to sit on is very unique and identifiable.

I take my seat and then lift my face to two men and one lady. Not a large panel, I shall be good.

“Good morning,” I say, still trying to get my voice on a professional tone.

“It’s 12:06 Miss Mhlongo,” the man sitting directly opposite me says. Mature, dark-skin and all Zothani’s facial features. Okay, he’s Dr Manzini.

“I’m sorry, good day,” I correct myself feeling a bit embarrassed.

They stare. I’m not sure what they want me to say, I’m not intimidated by their stares.

Dr Manzini takes a deep breath and looks at his panelists. “Right to it then, it doesn’t look like Miss Mhlongo will apologize for being late and keeping us waiting.”

Only if I could give myself a huge slap in the brain.

“I’m so sorry doctor, I had a trouble with....”

He raises his hand, “Save it!”

Oh wow, I pray not to get the job and work for him.

The lady picks my CV and starts with the interview. Basic questions, nothing I haven’t been asked before.

“You have applied for the laboratory technician position, Miss Mhlongo. What

characteristics and skills do you have that makes you a qualified lab technician?”

“I’m a detail-oriented graduate who holds a Bachelor’s degree in biochemistry and biology. I’m a good team leader, worker, collaborator, and I also excel as an individual.”

She looks at Dr Manzini and nods, then goes on to the next question; “What type of lab work and equipment are you familiar with?”

“I can work with centrifuges, titrators and pH meters. I’m trained to prepare samples for study and performing tests on specimens and recording data,” I say.

“And how would you ensure that your workspace doesn’t get contaminated Miss

Mhlongo?” She keeps addressing me like I have money- Miss Mhlongo, phewww.

Look, the thing is, everything she’s asking me here I have already answered over ten times, in different ways to different people.

“By following all the safety and sanitation protocol bla bla bla.”

A moment of silence falls in the room, there’s some tension in the air.

Then Dr Manzini asks, “Would you like us to cancel and postpone the interview to when you’re ready and more prepared?”

More prepared? Wait, I didn’t say bla bla bla out loud, right?

“I’m prepared Dr, I’m so sorry, I just had too much trouble with the taxis, I’m

physically and emotionally exhausted,” I say.

He doesn't say anything, just gives the lady a nod to go on.

I have to take a deep breath and be respectful, even though I know I'm not going to get their call after this.

“What are your interests outside of work Miss Mhlongo?” – the lady.

I look at her and shrug, “Nothing.”

Stares again! Gosh, I really have no interests outside of work or anything.

“What would you do if you had troubles diagnosing abnormalities in a specimen?” she asks.

“It’s important to determine proper diagnosis for a patient, so I’d definitely consult with other lab professionals,” I say. How predictable was that question!

“You have no interests outside of work?” – Dr Manzini, he’s staring at me. I don’t know if it’s cold or I just don’t like his aura. He doesn’t have that doctor’s protective thing, it looks like he’d rather kill you than save your life.

“Well, I take care of my son, that’s my interest outside of work,” I say.

“It says on your CV you’re part of the Autism Awareness group,” he says staring at me below those eyebrows.

“My son is autistic, I used to share my experiences to equip others.” I don’t even

remember who said I should put that on my CV, it's useless because I no longer attend those things.

“Oh, you have an autistic child?” Curiosity sparks his eyes.

I know what's coming, I'm bored already. It's a dumb question everyone wants an answer for.

“You don't have to ask, yes he loves to count, he loves numbers.” How can I roll my eyes internally?

“I'm happy to know Miss Mhlongo,” he says and shifts his eyes away from me.

More questions, I'm singing out answers I've crammed for years with little to no passion in my voice. I think my body language gives it away too, I'm tired and

hungry, my shoes are annoying me, then there's Dr Manzini's mean face.

When they say my interview has ended, I intentionally breathes out a "thanks God" and earn myself another stare from Dr Manzini. They're not going to call me, I don't care, it's nothing out of ordinary.

"Sorry miss," I say to the lady before I walk out.

She lifts her eyes, I think I like her than others.

"Do you know where I can eat?" I ask.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 32

SALO MHLONGO

I only found out on Sunday morning that Zothani has a working relationship with Solwazi. It's something I should've predicted, maybe I would've been able to save the drama that has happened. I was not happy when I found out that he used the opportunity to worm his way into Nzuzo's life, in a sneaky way that it happened. Zothani had to take some responsibility, after all he invited Nzuzo to the event, it kind of looked like he was trying to set them up. I know at some point

Nondu thought like that too; it was too much of a coincidence.

But we've worked past that, he talked to Solwazi. Today we are having our last dinner with his parents. I've had a good stay, now I'm back on my feet and ready to go back to work. I decided to give Mam' Zungu a break and cook dinner, despite them not wanting me to. I'm no longer just a guest, I'm a family member, at least that's how they treated me. I have prepared salads, grilled chicken and mashed potatoes. Bab' Zungu doesn't eat meat unless it's overcooked and soft, I made some mushrooms and cranberry sauce for him.

**“I’m just waiting for your father’s word,”
the voice says behind me.**

I turn and look at him. He’s leaning by the door with his hands in his pockets, wearing a wide grin on his face. It’s the apron I’m wearing, I’ve never gotten into full girlfriend duties with him, most of the times it’s him who has to cook for me.

He walks in, “Then you can be an official member of this kitchen.”

“Member of the kitchen, not wife?” I ask rolling my eyes.

“Wife. My wife,” he stands behind me. He’s very close, I can feel his front parts on my butt. Then he links his arm around me, I don’t know how he expects me to move around.

I turn my head and kiss his lips, then I gently push him away.

“I will give you your time later Zothani,” I say.

“I just miss you. Do you need any help?”
He’s pulling down his shirt and moving away.

“No, I’m almost done, you can help me set the table later,” I say.

“Nkatha is coming. Have you spoken to your sister?”

“No, we only spoke in the morning,” I say
turning to look at him. It sounds like he has something he wants to comment on.

But he doesn’t say anything further.

“Mmmm, let me not disturb you in your kitchen,” he says and walks out.

I hope Nondu nailed the interview, I have to call her before setting the table. Luckily I cooked enough, Zothani didn't see the need to tell me that his brother would be here before I started cooking.

Nondu's phone rings unanswered. I try MaNkosi, I'm sure she's home now.

“Sally,” she answers.

“Hi MaMdala, I'm trying to get hold of Nondu.”

“She's in her bedroom, I will wake her up, hold on a minute.”

Do they have a different time zone at home? Why is Nondu sleeping before 7pm? Maybe she's tired from travelling, she was using taxis after all.

I call again after a few minutes and get her.

"How did the interview go?" I ask her.

"I'm not going to get the job," she says.

Okay, that's very disappointing to hear.

"Why? Did you fail to answer the questions?"

"Not really, but it was fucked up. Thanks for putting in the word for me, I just don't think I'm meant for the laboratory job, or any other good job."

This is not the attitude I got from her before the interview, obviously something happened and drained her off all hopes.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Let me close the door,” she says.

I need to lower the heat on the stove while she closes the door, it looks like there’s a lot happening on her side.

After a moment she comes back to the phone;

“So I’m single again,” she says.

“Single? What happened to Nkalipho?”

Even Kim Kardashian’s marriage lasted longer than this relationship. It can’t be, not this easily, I mean they were in love.

“We fought over the clothes that Solwazi bought for Nzuzo. It was bad, I just didn’t realize at the time, I took it lightly. He threw a scissor on me, my wrist has been swollen. Him not reaching out makes me wonder if it was really a mistake or he wanted to hurt me,” she says.

Okay, people got physically hurt, this is heavy.

“You haven’t talked to him?” I ask.

“No, but I miss him. I feel like we are too much for each other, I have my burdens, he has his, and the thing we are trying to build is just crumbling down before it even builds up.”

I'm not good with relationship advices,
Zothani is my first serious relationship, I'm
still learning as I go.

“What are your instincts telling you?” I ask.

“That he made a mistake. But he's just not
acting like it. Maybe a person who has a
child shouldn't get in a relationship with
someone who doesn't have one, it's a mess
formula,” she says.

“Reach out, at least you'd know that you
tried,” I say.

I hear a heavy sigh, then she promises me
she will call him. In all this I blame Solwazi,
this guy has been history but as soon as
Nondu starts something he's back and
causing havoc from a distance.

Zothani comes and helps me arrange the food and take it to the dining room. Bab' Zungu always have his food with a cup of Trinco tea, if not fresh lemon juice.

I'm boiling water, everything else is sorted. Then the door opens, Nkatha walks in followed by Nokwanda. One more plate!

“Hello Salo,” she says, hyped up and coming to me with her arms open.

“This is a surprise,” I hug her back.

“Nkatha invited me,” she says.

I can never get used to her calling her fathers by their names. They're not young, both are in their late 30s, Nkatha is counting down months before he's 40. It's inappropriate regardless of her being bigger than her age.

“I figured you’re probably bored and need a female company,” he explains, his eyebrow raised a little.

“I cooked enough, it’s not a problem,” I tell him.

“If you’re making Zungu tea, can I have a cup as well?” He looks at Nokwanda, “Go and greet your grandparents,” he says.

Nokwanda grabs a packet of potato chips before leaving the kitchen. I figure Nkatha has something he wants to chat to me about, I hope it’s good news.

“Your sister has a potential,” he says.

That doesn’t sound good...

“Did she pass the interview?” I ask.

“No, she came an hour late and was disrespectful throughout the interview. She didn’t act like someone who’s passionate or in need of a job,” he says.

Moods, yes I know she has them. But to say she was disrespectful, that’s not like Nondu.

“So she’s not going to get the job?” I ask.

“Unfortunately no, there were candidates who had more experience and passion than her,” he says.

I’m disappointed, I didn’t expect Nondu to blow this up. I understand she’s had a lot of interviews where she gave it her all and didn’t make it. But she had a shot at this one and more advantage than other candidates.

“Thanks for considering it. She’s not usually like that, she’s been looking for a job for years, her father passed away, her son’s father denied paternity, her mother doesn’t work or receive any pension, it’s just her making ends-meet. I don’t know what happened with her, she’s been to over 10 interviews and has never done anything like that.” I turn to the kettle and unplug it. Then I heave a sigh and rub my forehead, I’m stressed.

“I gave her a chance to postpone the interview but she refused and still went on and disrespected the panel.” He sounds more concerned than offended by her actions. I think I can still ask for another favor.

“Nzuzo hasn’t been well, I think that affected her emotions as well. I will talk to her and find out what happened. Is it possible for her to have another opportunity?”

“Should I then give all other candidates second interview chances?” He wasn’t going to agree that easily anyway.

“She needs this job more than she needs oxygen,” I say.

He exhales heavily, “I don’t know, she has to pull a miracle for me to believe in her. She can come again tomorrow at 2:30 pm, if she’s even a second late I will cancel.”

“I promise you, she won’t.” If I could I’d be on his feet kissing them. I know it’s not me, he wants to hire Nondu but wants her to

come on board first. He's the first person to even make this consideration, Nondu better come right.

Speaking of the devil, she's calling as Nkatha walks off.

"His number is not going through," she says.

It sounds like she's crying over there.

"Khohlwa amadoda, tomorrow at 2:30pm you have a second interview with Dr Manzini. Can you please put aside your personal problems until after the interview?"

"Wait, there's a second interview?" She's shocked.

“Because he believes in you and I’m sleeping with his brother free of charge. Make it worthy, abeg!”

“Oh my goodness, this is crazy.”

“What would be crazy is you letting Nzuzo down for the second time. You’re doing this for him more than yourself, awukhohlwe kancane uNkalipho.”

“I’m ironing my dress right now, thank you so much.”

I have hope, she will nail it tomorrow.

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MASENTLE

I have known the Mngunis for ten years now. Mnguni and I have been together for nine years, the other one year I was just a newly-graduated social worker taking over Ruby Ntuli who had worked closely with the family in the past. She introduced me to Mnguni, I was just 22 at the time, after a few months I was at his house frequently. I first knew him as the father of a troubled 19 year old. His whole life depended on making his son comfortable. The word happiness was something they were not familiar with. I don't know how long he had been doing it before, he had no life outside what Nkalipho wanted. Almost nonexistent social life, had been single for over 5 years. To me he looked more broken than his son. He only wanted me to make his son okay,

he had abandoned his own happiness. I worked hard to change that, he couldn't be the father he wanted to be if he wasn't happy in his own life. At that time Nkalipho didn't seem interested in any of his efforts, he just lived with him because he had no where else to go. He was holding a grudge against him because he abandoned him as a child, which led to the abuse and death of his mother.

My mother only started warming up to me as a Mnguni wife two years ago and unfortunately her time on earth was already limited. I fell pregnant at 24 for a man who was 45 years old. My family fought, in their eyes he had taken advantage of a young girl under the disguise of needing help for his son. The

truth is, I played a part in it as well, I invited myself to his house when it had nothing to do with work, I took him out 'to have fun' and gave him advices that I was too young to give, and it wasn't even my place to do so. I failed to be professional and became what I called his safe place. Anyway, two years after giving birth I was his legal wife, Mrs Masentle Mnguni.

It's been a rollercoaster, like in any other marriage. We've had our ups and downs, but there's never been a day when I wake up wishing I was next to someone different.

I was here before the money, before Nkalipho called him "Baba" or referred to him as Mnguni. I was here comforting Mnguni and making calls to psychologists and rehab centers through his two suicide

attempts. Through the financial struggles and mental breakdowns, for both of them. I held his hand and shed tears of joy when Nkalipho finally wore the graduation gown. God knows what we had been through prior that moment; all the sacrifices we made. Mnguni will never question me if I randomly travel to New York for shopping, or spend a fortune to host high tea-parties, or insist on having only certain labels in my closet. Why? Because he knows what I've done for this family, I didn't come here to dig gold, there was no gold to begin with. So I don't go around explaining why I have a 55 year old husband, I have many labels to my name, one being a gold-digger, and I don't care a damn.

Well, my gold-digging includes me sitting across Nkalipho's couch for hours watching him drink his life away. Things seemed to be going well for the last couple of weeks, he was the happiest I've ever seen. But maybe a relationship is something he was not ready for, it looks like we have taken ten steps back. Today he didn't go to work, he didn't report anything to his father, he was just here, indoors the whole day. Mnguni is angry, I knew if I let him come here tomorrow we would have an ugly story to tell. So once again I'm here, "Did you break up?" I ask.

I know he'd be this broken if that's the reason he's like this. The five out of nine Borderline Personality Disorder symptoms

he has include the extreme fear of abandonment. Nkalipho is emotionally dependent, it's deeply rooted in his childhood traumas. He's improved in some other parts, Mnguni allowed him to move out after I assured him that he was no longer self-destructive.

“We will, she will break up with me,” he says.

There it is, I don't know if Nondu has picked these traits yet.

“What makes you say that?” I ask.

I'm more of an old sister version step-mother, he knows he can tell me anything and it will be safe with me.

He picks his glass from the floor and takes a large gulp. Then he looks at me, eyes bloodshot and empty.

“Do you believe that men go for women who are like their mothers?”

I tilt my head back, “I’m not like your father’s mother.”

“I know, I’m just asking if you think there’s some truth in that.”

“Some do go for women who are like their mothers, just not everyone. What makes you ask about this? Is it about Nondu?” I ask.

“Because I went for a woman who’s angry at her babydaddy. She shouts, tears clothes in front of a child and she’s very short-

tempered,” he says and pours another drink.

He’s back at it, it might be even deeper this time. If we let it get out of hand he might go back to rehab, he’s slowly losing control.

After taking another gulp he lifts his eyes.

“I threw a scissor, it hurt her hand. I don’t think there will be coming back from that, she’s not the forgiving type.”

“You threw a scissor at her?” I’m beyond shocked.

“It was not intentional Masentle, I know what you’re thinking, it wasn’t like that at all.”

I don’t know if I can believe that, he started by comparing her to his mother, that raises a lot of questions.

“Why did you do that?” I ask.

“I was parked down her road trying to put my emotions in place, she had just left my house after finding out that her ex gave Nzuzo some clothes. Then I heard Nzuzo crying, I know Nondu, I knew she’d get in there and do something crazy. So alarm bells went off, I got out of the car and walked in to find Nzuzo stripped naked and crying for his clothes. I got myself involved and I think that’s what made things worse, she took the scissor and started cutting them off.”

Okay, there’s a scissor, a young boy crying and a mother cutting.

“I was angry and wrong,” he says.

He regrets it. He was triggered, but those are two different scenarios.

“Did you apologize to her?”

He shakes his head. Oh gosh!

“Have you at least checked up on her?”

He shrugs, “I know she will break up with me, I’m not looking forward to it.”

“You can’t always act on fear than common sense Nkalipho. Your silence on the issue makes it look like you did that on purpose, you have to worked hard to prove that you’re not a violent person, what happened in the past happened because of certain circumstances, it doesn’t define you,” I’m trying to open his eyes. I know fear is not something he can help but he

loves Nondu and right now he's closing doors on himself.

“What if I call to explain and she doesn't want to hear it, she just wants to end things? I love them, I don't want to live in the world where they're not a part of my life, but that window keeps opening.” He inhales sharply and buries his face in his hands.

“You cannot hide forever, you need to take responsibility for your actions. And this thing of drinking everyday, you're doing it everyday again. I told her you have it under control, don't make it look like being with you is a burden to someone who's already carrying a lot,” I tell him and take the bottle standing next to his feet.

“I will stop, don’t stress.” He stands and brushes his face. Then he takes two steps and stagger. So much for having it under control!

“I have to go before your father falls asleep, make sure you fix things with her, I will arrange a family session with Dr Richardson.” I leave him staggering towards the bedroom, I throw the bottle in the bin and head back to my house.

Sphiwe is long gone to bed, I tiptoe into his bedroom to give him a night-night kiss and then go to the kitchen for one glass of wine. I’m not a drunk, I’m a random wine drinker, this is one of those nights.

I'm sitting on the kitchen high-chair, still in my yellow wrap-dress and flat sandals.

From here I'm taking a shower and joining that man in bed.

I hear the footsteps, then the strong smell of his body lotion hits my nose. He stands behind my chair and flips the hair off my neck. Then he places both his hands on my shoulders and gives me a few squeezes.

I release a long sigh, it's been a long day.

Just when I start to enjoy it he stops. Well, he was a scaffolder before having offices with aircons and tea-girls, these hands specialized in handling hard labor tools, not massaging bodies.

"You should come to bed," he says, linking his arm around my waist.

I let him take me off the chair, he pulls me to the bedroom and sits me down on the bed.

He pulls my legs to his lap and takes my shoes off. I know it's late, he has an early morning tomorrow, but no.

“Mnguni, I have to take a bath,” I say.

“You took one late during the day, let's sleep, uma unuka uzonukela umyeni wakho.”

Well, Mnguni has spoken. I don't say anything further, I just laugh, it's not like I smell anyway. I raise my arms and let him take the dress off.

“So what did he say the problem is?” he finally asks.

“Relationship problems, I think he will be fine.” I’m not going to tell him about Nkalipho drinking like a fish again, I know how much he worries about him.

“But we have a family session with Dr Richardson soon,” I tell him.

“At least a white man with red hair gets bread from our problems.” He’s never liked Richardson, he tolerates him for me. He experienced apartheid, maybe it’s those grudges because Richardson has been nothing but white and helpful.

“What time do you wake up tomorrow?” I ask.

“5:30, I have somewhere to be before work, I won’t even see Sphiwe off to school.”

I set the alarm and switch off the lights and get under the covers. We are sleeping, he has to wake up early. I kiss his cheek and turn to sleep on my stomach- just a habit.

I feel his hand brushing around my waist, he's shifted closer. Is this man not tired? I lie still, pretending not to feel anything.

"Mama wakwami," he says in a low, husky whisper.

Okay, I'm all his. I will turn and give him what he wants.

"I've been waiting," he says, his fingers trailing over my spine.

"You have an early morning Mthenjwa," I say, softly moaning to his touch.

"Leave time to the watch, just turn around and face your husband," he says and gently

lifts my shoulder. I turn and face him, my beloved needy husband. Here in this bed, on these sheets, love is made at any hour.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 33

NONDUMEZULU

I didn't tell my mother the real reason why I've been called for a second interview, she thinks it's a normal procedure. This time around I'm scared, I know I have to give it my best otherwise I'd be letting down Salo,

Nzuzo, my mom, and Dr Manzini himself. These are people who believe in me more than I believe in myself. I woke up today and went to the mall to buy a blazer to go with my formal black pants. I passed by the salon and had them style my hair. I'm looking more professional, I have gone over my introduction over and over again. I will not roll my eyes or say anything out of turn. There's a chance that I will be hired, a big one. As much as it's a back-door kind of opportunity now, I do qualify for the job, I studied for it.

Nzuzo got out of school earlier today, their teacher had a workshop to attend. Him walking me to the gate and asking me same

questions; what is the interview, am I going to sleep at the interview, motivates me even more. I give him R1 and tell him to go and put it in his container. I walk out of the gate and head down the road for taxis. I want to be there 30 minutes early, I won't repeat the same mistake twice.

A car pulls up next to me. It's the Hyundai Creta, out of all days he's chosen to show up today. Salo pulled my ear, I don't need him to mess up my emotions today.

The window rolls down, I look away before I see his face.

“Can I give you a lift?” he asks.

My immediate answer would be no, but that led me into being one hour late to my

interview, I cannot let pride and emotions stand in the way again.

I take a deep breath and get in the car.

“Hi,” I say, briefly running my eyes on him.

He looks fine in that cowboy hat and white shirt. It’s more of his father’s style than his though, I wonder what’s cooking.

“Hey, how are you?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I force a little smile.

“Where to?” he asks.

“Town,” I say.

He glances at me and chuckles.

“What’s the special occasion in town?”

“I’m going to Umhlali for another interview, I’m saying drop me in town so that I can get a taxi to Stanger,” I say.

“I’m in no rush, I will take you to the interview, if that’s okay with you.”

Why wouldn’t it be okay?

“I’d appreciate that,” I say.

The road is clear, he can drive but he’s still.

He has something to say but he doesn’t know how to say it.

I go first; “I tried to call you yesterday but your phone wasn’t going through.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he says.

He knows he has to give me more than that. In fact a two-pages lengthy explanation on why he did what he did. For someone who hates being walked out on, he’s very good at disappearing and ignoring people.

He takes my arm first, then turns his eyes to me. He lifts my hand up and takes a look at my wrist. There's just a small bruise now, nothing hectic.

I expect an apology, but again it doesn't come. He lets go of my hand and drives.

I guess he knows it happened but it doesn't bother him.

We don't speak until we get to the garage. I'm not angry at him anymore, I just yearn for his apology and his assurance that it was a mistake and we are still okay.

"Do you need anything?" he asks.

"No, I'm fine, thanks," I say.

"They want to interview you twice?"

“Yes,” I’m not in the mood to explain why I’m going there again.

He pays and we drive off. There’s no music, just us in an awkward silence. I’ve never been in a relationship that’s emotionally draining as this, and the strangest thing is that I don’t want out. I don’t know how we are going to survive with a little distance between us if I get the job, what I know is that I love him.

It’s 2:10pm, we are outside Dr Manzini’s surgery. I’m early, thanks to my silent driver.

“Are you ready?” he asks me.

I nod, “I think I am.”

“Give it your best shot Nondumezulu. I know you don’t believe this, but I want you to have your financial freedom and the job of your dreams.”

I’m not comfortable with him addressing me by Nondumezulu. I don’t know what he’s hinting at, it’s just not the right time because I’m going to an interview in few minutes.

“Thanks,” I say, trying not to sound bruised as I am.

“I went to your workplace and they told me you weren't going to work, so I came to your street and parked there hoping you'd come out and I'd get a chance to talk to you. I don't want us to talk now, your mind has to focus on the interview. But when

you're done I'd like us to go somewhere before taking you back home."

"Where do you want us to go?" I look at him a bit anxious.

"You will find out when we get there. It's a trip I didn't want to take with you because I know it may destroy everything I've tried to built. But now it's important that I take you there because I have ruined us, and maybe, just maybe, it will bring us some light," he says.

"What makes you say you ruined us?" I ask.

"Because I got violent with you. I hurt you Nondu, I haven't been able to look at myself in the mirror. I hate myself for what

happened, I don't even know how to start saying I'm sorry," he says.

"By saying you're sorry," I say.

He inhales sharply, "I'm sorry, it will never happen again, please give me another chance."

I don't have much to say, our eyes lock, I can see the fear and sadness buried in the depths of his soul. I don't know what he thinks is going on, I did not break up with him, neither did I think about it. But we will go where he wants us to go, maybe it's a trip that's going to answer some of the questions that I have.

He's waiting for me. Even though we are not on good terms, if I shall put it that way, but

his presence means everything. I walk in with my shoulders up, I'm right on time and my confidence is overflowing.

“You're back,” Lizzy says smiling.

It's the front-desk lady, I got her name when I hunted for a food outlet. Today I don't have to sit on the couch, we are chatting while heading to Dr Manzini's office.

“Good luck, I hope today you're not hungry,” – Lizzy.

I laugh and knock on the door. The voice tells me to come in sooner than I expected, my nerves are running short. I walk in, it's just Dr Manzini alone. I thought this would be like a normal interview, with a panel and all.

“Good day,” I say nervously walking through the door.

“Miss Mhlongo it’s good to see you again, have a seat.”

Why is it not that lady instead of him? He’s not a friendly-looking man.

There’s a sealed bottle of water in front of me and one in front of him. He loosens the knot of his tie and sits up straight. He’s freaking me out.

“You’re on time today, didn’t taxis give you trouble?” There’s an underlying mocking tone but he’s looking at me with a serious face.

“I had someone driving me here,” I say.

“Is he or she going to be available everyday to bring you to work?”

“Ummm, I doubt,” I say.

“Then how do you plan to come to work Miss Mhlongo? Because taxis give you trouble and exhaust you,” he asks.

Okay, this is about my first interview.

“I will relocate to somewhere closer, then I won’t have to take 3 taxis coming here.”

He nods, “I will take your word on that.

Next is your attitude, I have a problem with your body language and how you speak.”

“I can fix that,” I say.

I'm desperate here.

“No, you won't. ” He pulls a small card and gives it to me. It has a Dr Khan's contact details. “That’s Dr Khan, you will call her

on Monday morning, she will tell you when to come," he says.

I'm really confused.

"I don't understand Doctor," I say.

"You have to attend cognitive behavioral therapy for a week, then I will take it from there," he says.

I put my purse on his desk, release a deep breath and look at him again.

"I thought this was an interview," I'm not pleased right now.

"And I thought you were a professional candidate, seemingly both of us were wrong."

Okay, I have to relax, this might not be bad as I think.

“Am I going to get the job after that therapy?” I ask.

“I don’t know, Dr Khan’s feedback will tell me if you’re employable or not.” He opens his water and takes a sip.

“Okay, thank you, I will give Dr Khan a call.”

“Thank you Miss Mhlongo, that’s all.”

I can’t believe I came all the way here to be told I need a behavioral therapy. A whole week of that therapy and I’m still not promised the job. Where am I going to even live while attending that therapy? Had I put myself together yesterday I wouldn’t be in this situation today.

I grab the bottle of water before walking out, it was put here for me after all.

I'm not happy with today's outcome, but I smile as I bid Lizzy goodbye.

I get in the car, throw my purse at the back
gulp down the water and heave a long sigh.

Damn!

"How did it go?"

Oh, there's a human being next to me.

"Good," I lie.

"You didn't stay too long, must've been a
short interview." He's trying to dig.

"Yeah, it was short," I say.

I will tell him when I'm ready, there's still a
mystery he has to solve for me first.

"Shall we go?" he asks.

"Yes, please," I lie back on my seat and
close my eyes.

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I open my eyes when the car stops. I chose to sleep, he could've taken me to a slaughterhouse and had my throat cut off. But I'm in front of a dodgy block of rooms. The paint is peeled, some don't have windows, there's an old tractor stuck on the yard. He's definitely here to cut my throat off.

“Where am I?” I ask, alarmed.

“Home,” he says. He hasn't took the belt off, his other hand is on the wheel, he's staring at the windscreen, his thoughts seem to be far away.

“Whose home?” This doesn’t look like anyone’s home. Do people even live here? It’s in the middle of sugarcane fields, he’s scaring the crap out of me.

“Nkalipho, whose home?” My voice is firmer, who can relax if a man she hasn’t been speaking to suddenly takes her to a place like this?

“Mine Nondu, I grew up here,” he says, finally taking his eyes off the windscreen and looking at me. Only then I realize that we are in his mother’s house, or room. I didn’t know he still comes here, this was a crime scene that left him with open wounds.

“Are we going to go inside?” I ask.

I'm curious to see how it looks like from the inside. It will give me a rough picture of his childhood.

He opens his door, I open mine and climb out.

I thought it was awkward that he chose to dress up like his father today, but now I understand, he didn't want to come here as Nkalipho. We are heading inside one room with a peeled door and broken windows. I can just kick the door and it would fall and break into pieces.

He unlocks the padlock on the chain fastened from the door to a roof pole. A group of cockroaches were having a boardroom meeting, they adjourn it as soon as we walk in.

I cannot see anywhere to sit. The bed looks 'dinosaur old', if I sit on that three-legged wooden chair my ass would be on the floor within a second, there's rust everywhere.

He miraculously pulls two crates of beer and turns them on their sides and takes out his face towel to wipe them.

He signals for me to take a seat, he hasn't open his mouth since we walked in.

"Do you visit often?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

Today must be special then.

It's a small room, I can count steps from one corner to another.

"You schooled around here?" I ask.

He nods.

“Was it safe? I mean there are sugarcane fields all around?” I’m pushing for a conversation to happen.

“It was safer than this room,” he says.

We are getting there, I don’t know if I’m ready yet.

He comes and sits on the other crate.

“The bed behind you, it was my mother’s. I slept on the floor, I think they stole the sponge after I left,” he says.

“Wow,” I say.

“My mother cooked here, we bathed here, slept here, and done pretty much everything in this space. Mnguni was in Durban,” he says.

I've never felt like he despises his father until this moment. But I think it's just memories, not real feelings because that would suck, his father loves him.

"Did he come to visit though?" I ask.

"He did and stopped when I turned 7. He had met someone else in Durban and I paid a price for it," he chokes down those words with a deep exhalation.

A moment of silence passes, I'm trying to picture a lot of things sitting here.

"My mother loved me Nondu," he says.

I don't know why he's trying to convince me.

I look at him, "Really?"

“She did. She just had anger, dangerous anger against my father. I mean, she tried her best, even when there was no food she’d go out and hustle until she found a plate for me. She told me everyday that she loved me, I felt it too. It’s just that some days she’d let anger get the better of her, I hated those days.”

“What were those days like?” I ask.

“Violent, explosive, unpredictable, cold...”

He stops abruptly and swims through his own thoughts. After a moment he continues, “I’d be scared, so scared that even after her death when someone raised their voice at me I’d wet my pants.”

“My goodness! How long did it take for you to be okay?” I ask.

“I’m okay, I still hate it when people raise their voices at me. I think we’ve had this conversation before,” he turns and looks at me.

I didn’t know it was this deep, I regret all those times where I raised my voice at him.

“I let my mother get away with things because I understood she was hurt by my father. I was old enough to see that my father was not around, and as the only thing that reminded her of him I had to bear the cross. She’d tell me what to say to the nurses after the injuries, I’d lie to my teachers to protect her. We were in it together, both dumped by Mmguni, I got it.”

I nod, I understand a child would do that, but nothing will change that his mother was a pyscho in my head.

“Then I was 10, old enough for her to start dating again. The traitor you see outside, it belonged to Mkalele, her boyfriend. There was a woman called MaKhoza next door, I’d go and sleep in her room if Mkalele was visiting, they couldn’t have me in the same room you know.”

I nod.

He takes a deep breath, I think it’s about to get heavy.

“I was a boy, growing up in an informal settlement, I knew quite a lot for my age. So when MaKhoza started doing funny things in front of me I knew what it was.

First night I didn't say anything, I listened to her making funny noises and allowed her to pull my hand and put it between her thighs. Second night she wanted me to move my hand and touch her, I knew it wasn't right."

My heart has just dropped to my feet. I knew he had traumas but I didn't know sexual trauma was in the mix as well. It's too much!

"Mkalele was going to visit again the next day, I told my mother what happened, I didn't want to go to MaKhoza's room. I was curious about stuff but she was just too old and hairy for me to seek any sort of experiments from. My mother said why would MaKhoza start doing that only after

she got Mkalele who made her happy.
MaKhoza had babysat me all my life and watched me when she was working late, why only when Mkalele came to the picture? She said I was lying. Later that day I was in my pyjamas, carrying my little blanket and pillow, and sent back to MaKhoza's room. I did not go, I wrapped myself with a blanket and slept behind the rooms. I was very angry at my mother. I had helped her fight her fights, sometimes I'd be a victim but still lie to protect her. There was a docket at the police station, we opened a case against a non-existing man who dragged me to the fields and cut me with the knife. I even described him from my head, I was a professional liar for that woman. And all I wanted from her was

to return the favor and fight for me. But she chose to think I was jealous and taking my father's side. If it was you in my position what would you have done?"

That's a hard one.

"Was leaving the place and going to your father not an option?" I ask.

He shakes his head, "My father was in Durban seeing someone else. You know how babydaddies are, right?"

"I understand. I don't know what I would've done. But what did you do?"

"We fought, she thought she could do what she always did and I'd just let her get away with it," he says.

I hold my breath, I have been wanting the truth, I snooped around for it and failed.

Am I ready to find out if my boyfriend is a murderer or not?

“There was a table here,” he shows me with a finger. “She was cutting the spinach, there was a boiling pot of pap on the other plate of the stove. I pulled a machete and threw it at her, the same way I threw a scissor at you. It landed on her arm, she turned and tried to fight, I caught the machete again and made my next hit the final one.”

I’m frozen; not breathing, not moving.

So he really killed his mother, my instincts were right about this.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 34

NONDUMEZULU

I break the silence with a fake cough.

“Bless you!” he says.

He’s sitting on the crate like a sinner who’s waiting for his fate. Yes, I don’t want to ever see him holding a machete, but his mother had it coming.

“Where’s your mother’s family?” I ask. It’s such an awkward question to bring after being told what I’ve just been told. I don’t want him to tell it over and over again.

“My grandmother passed a few years ago, I was not in touch with others, my mother was never close with them,” he says.

“Do miss her?” I ask.

“Ugogo? Yeah, she was my grandmother, I loved her.”

“No Nkalipho, I’m talking about your mother. Do you miss her?”

He takes a deep breath and then nods.

I figured, he’s only holding her accountable for the MaKhoza thing, not the overall trauma and injuries.

“What happened to Mkalele and MaKhoza?” This is just out of curiosity.

“I don’t know, my father got here before the police and asked that I’m moved away

to receive psychological help, from there I went to live with his sister for two years, then he got his own place and took me in. I wasn't interested in knowing where everyone went after the incident, I only came back here once," he says.

"Is this the reason why you can't sleep at night?" I ask.

"Yeah, I didn't mean to kill her, I just wanted her to stop what she was saying and believe me. I wanted her to be on my side, I stayed with her dead body the whole night thinking she'd wake up. I mean, she had cut me with a knife in the stomach, I bled too but I did not die on her. I cannot unsee her lying dead with her eyes widely open and tongue out. I think that picture

will never leave my head.” I can feel the pain in his voice, he regrets that she died, not that he threw the machete. Somehow I get it, she was his mother, as evil as she was, the only parent he had at that time.

“You could’ve died too when she operated you with a knife to give you a C-section. I don’t think you should be guilty. But I hate that this whole thing somehow links to you throwing a scissor at me after telling me to give Nzuzo his clothes. I’m not like your mother, I don’t physically hurt my son and...” He clears his throat before I finish.

I look at him widely, “I spank Nkalipho, that’s not violent, my mother spanked me too and I turned out fine.”

“I don’t think Nzuzo is a child you need to spank. He’s autistic, his frustrations build up easily, can’t you try other methods besides what your mother did to you?”

I can see this will end in an argument, most of our fights are always about Nzuzo.

“We were talking about you throwing a scissor,” I say.

He gets off the crate and kneels on the dusty floor in front of me.

Dramatic much!

“I’m so sorry snqandamathe sami. Bhebhe, wena owabhebhela umuntu ematsheni ngoba esaba amazolo.” I knew he wasn’t citing my clan names to respect me, just to get to that indecent part.

“Couldn’t you say Njomane?” I ask rolling my eyes.

“No, I love the one with ukubhebhana in the mix. This thing was started by your forefathers, that’s why you...”

“Jeez, Nkalipho!” Why is he turning this into an awkward sex talk?

“Ok, I was apologizing. I’m sorry for throwing the scissor and just for disrespecting your father’s house like that. I still want to have a legal relationship with your family.” He looks at me, his upper curving into a sexy smile.

“I’m only forgiving you because I know you were trying to fight for Nzuzo. My actions on that day cannot be justified, I’m also

sorry that I never listen to you when you tell me not to do something,” I say.

He raises his eyebrow, “What? Say that again?”

“I’m sorry I don’t listen to you Mnguni. I haven’t been in a serious relationship in a long time, I forgot how it was like to make compromises for a man and listen without feeling like I’m being controlled. Yes I was hurt before but that has nothing to do with you. You’ve been nothing but good to me. In fact I’ve never had a boyfriend who treats me good as you,” I say.

He claps his hands, “Wow!”

“I mean it Nkalipho, I do love and appreciate you.”

“Thank you, I’m happy to hear that. Now I wish I can throw you in bed and show you how much I missed you,” he says squeezing me in a tight hug.

We hug and kiss in the room he grew up in. I’m a straight girlfriend, there’s no other way about it. I missed him so much, I’m glad he brought me here, I think I understand him better now and I will try not to trigger him.

We leave everything as it was, he locks the room and we head back to the car.

“I’m hungry, do you have any snacks?” I ask.

“This is a car babe, not a kitchen, we will buy something on the way.”

Men are boring, what kind of a car doesn't even have a slab of chocolate?

"So baby tell me, don't lie about this."

"Okay," he looks at me curiously.

"Do you think I have a bad attitude?"

"I don't think, you have a bad attitude. Why?"

Wow, so he's judging me?

"That's not fair, everyone has their good and bad days. Me being in a bad mood on one day doesn't mean I have a behavioral problem," I say.

He chuckles, "Hhayi-bo, you asked for my opinion."

Yeah, right!

“Dr Manzini called me for a second interview. That’s what I thought it was, but he gave me a card to call a Dr Khan that I have to see on Monday,” I say with a low grunt.

“Why? I thought he was the one hiring,” he asks.

“No, Dr Khan will give me a behavioral therapy.”

His eyes widen, then he bursts out laughing.

“What did you do in the interview?”

I hate that he sort of understands this.

“I was not in my best behavior. But don’t you think it’s judgmental of Dr Manzini to think I need some sort of behavioral therapy just after one encounter?”

“Well, it’s not if he wants you to be part of his working space,” he says.

He’s a traitor, period!

“So you will get the job and move away?”

He’s staring at me with his hand on the cheek.

I’m not sure what’s gracing his mind as he asks the question.

“You have a car mos, you can come and see me at any time, and we will have sleepovers as much as we like. The only person I’m sad about is Nzuzo, he’s used to having me around and I will be forced to leave him behind for school.” I release a deep sigh. I haven’t thought about living away from Nzuzo until now, I was just thinking about getting the job, not the changes around it.

“As you said, Nzuzo’s Lume has a car, he will come and visit you every weekend.” He’s just comforting me, it won’t be the same, I will have to go to bed without seeing my son.

“I don’t know where I’m going to stay while attending the therapy. I can rent a room somewhere around Umhlali with the money that you gave me, but what if I still don’t get the job? I’d have wasted my money and lost my existing job over nothing.”

“He wouldn’t put you into therapy and waste his money and resources on someone he doesn’t intend to hire. And trust me, you’re not going to struggle with the room and all those things, I’m not dead,” he says.

“You’re not dead?” I ask with a chuckle.

“At least not financially, I can look out for my girlfriend.”

“I forget that you’re monied,” I say.

“Do I look poor?” he asks.

“Yeah, if you’re not in the green work-uniform, you are in cowboy hats or tracksuits. I mean, wear a black suit and carry a briefcase, and come ask for me at work speaking pure English,” I say.

“You watch romantic movies a lot. Even in your new workplace I will come in my work uniform and boots, you’ve never went out of the way to please me either.”

What the hell? He’s so ungrateful.

“I wore new panties for you,” I say.

He frowns, “When? I have only seen you wearing the ones that are dry as a paper.”

“Go to hell!” I take my phone and lean back on my seat.

“I’m driving both of us, that means we are both going there.”

I roll my eyes and log on Whatsapp to give Salo an update about the interview.

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

She’s home expecting her husband to come back from whatever he’s been the whole day. If he’s not cheating, he’s hanging out

with friends, this man is pure headache these days. She knows he turned her against Salo, she just doesn't know to what extent. She's been focused on being a wife, getting him to trust her again and constantly spraying some 'spices' on his food to strengthen their love. He's too weak now, the way he was crying for Salo's baby, it wasn't the husband she wants to have. They've come too far together, building this family into what it is today.

There's a knock at the door. She gets off the couch with a frown, she's only expecting Babo home and that one wouldn't knock in his own...

"Mamaaaa!" It's Sbonga opening her arms and laughing thinking she's surprised.

Well, she is, not in a good way though.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, gently pushing her off and looking at her.

Sbonga walks in dragging her bags. “Baba fetched us, there’s no school on Monday so we have a long weekend. What did you cook?”

Before she can answer Babo walks in with Sekhona, her only son.

He’s a bit shy, unlike Sbonga.

He greets and only goes for a hug when Busisekile opens her arms.

“I didn’t know you were coming home,” she says and steals a quick glance at her husband. Why did he fetch the children without letting her know? What is he up to now?

“It’s a surprise,” Sekhona says with a shy smile.

Babo pats his back and tells him to go change his clothes so that they can fix the door handle of his room.

Sbonga has disappeared with a plate of food she found in the microwave.

Busisekile is not even paying attention to her, just looking at Babo with enquiring eyes.

“They haven’t been home in a very long time. Tomorrow I will do a small ceremony to reunite them with the ancestors,” he says.

Busisekile starts sweating. This man is clearly up to something. In fact he’s been

acting funny these days, from contacting Salo's babydaddy to this!

"Without my permission?" she asks.

"They're my children too. Why do I need permission from you?"

Oh, this is how he talks to her now?

"I don't want them to be linked to the ancestors, that's forcing your religion down their throats. They will choose once they're 18 if they want to follow the ancestor belief or something different," she says.

Babo frowns, "Are you asleep and dreaming MaKhumalo?"

"I'm serious Njomane, they're doing well at school, why must we...?" She doesn't finish, Babo shakes his head. A lot has been unveiling lately, he has his things that he

swallows after eating her food. Magagula knew she'd be doing things to try and tame him.

“You’ve never had a problem when it comes to Salabenzi. Busisekile, I really don’t want to believe what people are saying about you out there.”

She folds her arms, “What are they saying?”

“That I’m not the only one who hasn’t been faithful.”

She laughs, “What are you trying to say Njomane? Are you insulting my children and saying they’re not yours because I refuse to let you take them to that stolen alter of yours?”

Sekhona walks in to the argument and stops dead on his tracks, confused.

“Where is that coming from now? Do you have something you want to tell me perhaps?” He holds her cold glare.

Sekhona clears his throat. What did he come back to? He pulls the strings of his hoodie jacket and tells Njomane he’s done. He’s darker than everyone in the family, a bit too tall for his age with sharp ears and laid-back personality. Sbonga looks like her mother from head to toe, maybe her character as well.

“I’m coming mfan’ wami,” Babo says, dismissing him with a look.

He turns, takes a few steps away, then stops and looks back.

“Mama, pops, what’s the smoke?” he asks.

“Nothing my...” – Babo.

“Your father is the smoke,” – Busisekile.

Babo inhales sharply, “Not in front of a child, please.”

“Don’t make me look like a drama queen, you started it. What do you mean I haven’t been faithful in my marriage?”

“I didn’t say anything like that, I said...”

Sekhona grunts softly, “Can we sort the door handle pops? I’d like to rest.”

“If it was women you’re calling him for trust me he would’ve jumped and ran like a horse. Njomane ungake ulungisele umntanami iscabha?” She sighs dramatically, Sekhona laughs behind his

hands. Babo is annoyed but he doesn't drag the fight any further because she's going to have the last word anyway.

Sbonga appears with earphones in her ears and an empty plate in her hand. She was hungry, she wiped everything clean.

Busisekile lifts her eyes and almost faints.

“Sbongokuhle what have you done? Hhi hhi hhi!” She starts crying with her hands over her head.

Babo and Sekhona comes back rushing.

“What's going on?” Babo asks.

Sbonga is still taking off the earphones and trying to figure out what's happening herself.

**“Your food Njomane. Your f.o.o.d!” -
Busisekile running out of breath.**

“Oh shit, my food!” – Babo.

**He turns and runs to his brown jacket in
the bedroom. He comes back with a small
white container, he sprinkled some brown
powder on Sbonga’s hand and asks her to
swallow fast.**

**“Is this like medically tested and approved
to...?”**

“Sbonga swallow, fast!” – Babo.

**She covers her nose before throwing the
thing inside her mouth.**

**Busisekile has stopped crying, she’s looking
at them with her arms folded.**

Sbonga grabs a glass and fills it with water and gulps it down.

“Jeez, is anyone going to explain?” she asks, trying to wash down the bitter taste.

“Your mother put in some medication from nyanga to help me with my back pain. It's kind of dangerous for someone young like you, that's why I gave you this one, it inactivates that one,” Babo explains.

Busisekile inhales sharply then forces out a smile. He's out of control now, if she's not careful all these kids will turn against her because of this man. She's worked hard for this family, this is not what she expected from someone she calls a husband. Maybe he should be the 'late' husband, before she loses all her children.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 35

NONDUMEZULU

Sbonga comes here early in the morning to tell us that Babo is inviting us to a small ceremony taking place at 12. I didn't even know they were home, I haven't seen Sbonga and Sekhona in months. If they're not in school, they're at the Khumalos. Sbonga has hips bigger than mine, she's

getting lighter as she grows and resembling her mother more. She's the total opposite of Salo, after dropping the announcement she heads to the kitchen and makes herself a cereal.

She opens the fridge and looks inside. It seems like she's not finding what she was looking for. She digs in the cereal and looks at me with her mouth full.

"You work at Shoprite but you don't have any cake here?"

Oh, she was looking for a cake.

"Working there doesn't mean we can take cakes for free Sbonga," I say.

"Stay late and steal them," she says.

Life is so simple in her head.

“I will keep that in mind in future,” I say.

My mother laughs, “Don’t you dare, I don’t have the money to bail you out.” Then she looks at Sbonga and asks, “Is Salo coming to the ceremony?”

“No, she would’ve told me by now.” She’s done eating, now drinking the milk left in the bowl. This child is a piece of work. She goes to the cupboard and takes Nzuzo’s lollipop.

“Sbonga don’t, he will scream for the whole neighborhood to hear,” I say.

“Don’t worry, I will take him to the tuck-shop and buy him another one. I’m rich, I have a boyfriend who gives me money, please don’t tell my parents Mamdala,” she says to my mother.

My mother's jaws are on the floor. I can't say I'm surprised, boys would want a piece of her, she's beautiful and bubbly.

Speaking of the devil, Nzuzo walks in and immediately notices that she's eating her lollipop.

"Hi my friend, do you remember me? I'm your favorite aunt," Sbonga says, his lollipop is in her mouth. Her boyfriend could've just bought her a packet of them because he's a provider.

After staring at her for a moment Nzuzo climbs on top of the table without saying a word. I don't think he recognizes her or wants to have a conversation with her. Before anyone pays enough attention he

jumps from the table to the floor, he lands badly on his knee. Screams follow!

I rush to him but my phone rings and disturbs me. My mother takes over, now he's grown tired of that ball, he's back to jumping on top of the tables and hurting himself.

I look at the screen, I know this number, I just don't have it in my phone.

"Hello," I answer with a bit of hesitation.

"Nondu, it's me, please don't drop the call."

I want to drop, I told him and his wife to never contact me again.

"Why is he crying?" he asks.

I went to a BabyMama Insult Academy, I can take him in and out of his mother's

skirts, but I don't want to be dramatic in front of the mouth diarrhea patient-Sbonga.

"He fell," I say, my voice kept low.

"Can I talk to him, please?"

Didn't I tell this man to stay away from my son?

"We are waiting for your uncle, thank you, have a great day." I end the call and turn to Sbonga with a warm face. My mother took Nzuzo and went to the lounge, his screams have stopped.

My phone rings again, I press down the volume button and silence my phone.

"I thought it was my mother calling me home, I'm here to de-stress," Sbonga says.

I laugh, “To de-stress? You haven’t seen your parents in like forever and you already feel like they’re stressing you?”

“Their fights are exhausting. You should’ve heard my mother crying when I mistakenly ate my dad’s food. Then my dad gave me some bitter muthi because his food had medicine for his back pain and it would’ve killed me or something.”

“Babo and back pain?” I’m surprised because he’s been cheating with that same back. I doubt Aunt Teekay would’ve given him a chance to be in bed with her if he suffered from back pains.

“Maybe she broke his back,” Sbonga says and bursts out laughing.

I can't help but laugh as well. God help me and not make Nzuzo speak about me like that when he's a teenager. Kids know too much these days.

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I didn't want to attend this ceremony but my mother heard none of it, she insisted that we dress up and show up. I hate gatherings because in most cases I cannot keep an eye on Nzuzo, he easily tags on people he doesn't know and disappears in the crowds. Most people know him around, so he's never been lost, but I don't like taking chances. Right now as we speak I don't know where him and Sekhona went,

he followed Sekhona outside and now Babo needs them but can't find them anywhere.

It's a small ceremony, we are basically here to eat chickens and dumplings. I'm only eating because Sbonga and I are sharing a plate. I don't trust these people anymore, I've been looking around trying to see if I will see anything that belongs to us, but there's nothing.

Mam' Busie walks in with two bottles of soda and puts one in front of me and Sbonga. It's sealed, I will drink it.

"Hawu ntombi, how was your interview?" she asks me.

I look at my mother, eyes widen. Wasn't she the one who told me not to tell anyone?

“The interview?” my mother asks with a frown.

“Yeah, the interview, Nzuzo told me that his mother went to the interview and she will come back with lollipops,” – Mam’ Busie.

Do children ever shut up?

“Oh, I remember that, it didn’t go well,” I say like it’s something that I just remembered.

“Shame, maybe you should start selling amagwinya at the side, it doesn’t look like you will get a good job anytime soon,” she says.

Sbonga looks up and exclaims, “How can you say that Mama?”

“Say what? There’s nothing wrong with selling amagwinya, I have a 10kg of flour that I haven’t used, I can donate it to her,” she says.

My mother sips her soda and smiles. “That would be kind MaKhumalo, but I don’t think she’d get time to do that, maybe she’d try it in future.”

“She can, unless if she thinks it will embarrass her to that boy who drives a Hyundai Creta NZ 965-301,” she says.

I almost choke on the chicken bone I’m crushing with my teeth. Even I don’t know Nkalipho’s car registration, this is strange.

“Sisi uyajola?” – Sbonga with excitement.

My mother is shocked as I am.

“Was it a secret? The whole section knows,” Mam Busie says laughing. She doesn’t see how weird it is that she knows my boyfriend’s car better than she knows how to raise her children. “But you have one type, I bet you ask them if they have cars before dating them. Let’s hope he won’t leave you like Nzuzo’s father. That one broke records, he ran for the hills and never looked back.”

“Jeez Mama!” Sbonga is shocked. She looks at me apologetically, “Don’t mind her, there’s trouble in paradise, now she’s bleeding on other people.”

“What paradise? Go and tell your father that MaNkosi and I need more meat. Why are they so stingy? His dead fathers and

brother are not going to rise from their graves and come eat this,” Mam Busie says.

Now I believe Sbonga, there’s trouble in paradise, she’s never like this.

“No, I’m full MaKhumalo,” my mother says.

“It’s fine, you will wrap it and go home with it. Don’t be proud, this is free chicken, uyoze unuke ama-tin kafish,” she says dismissing my mother with a hand.

I don’t care if Babo denied her sex or what, I don’t like the way she’s speaking to my mother. And who said we live on tins of fish?

“We do have meat at home,” I tell her.

As soon as Nzuzo comes back we are leaving, I'm done being her bleeding pad, she must go and face her husband.

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SALO MHLONGO

Life is unpredictable, now I depend on lifts to get to and from work. I've been waiting for Zothani to come and pick me up for over 5 minutes now, he keeps saying he's driving in, making a fool out of me. I'm so annoyed that I don't even hear the woman walking past me greeting. She stops after a few steps and comes back to me.

“I said sawubona mntanami,” she repeats.

“Yebo Ma, I’m sorry I was on Whatsapp.” I don’t want her to think I have pride, I respect my elders. I think she’s belongs to the new group of cleaners. She must be in her late 40s, she’s wearing a seshweshwe dress and matching doek, there’s a ring on her finger. She should be rushing home to her husband and kids.

“Your shadow is very dark, I saw it coming there and even at a distance after passing you I felt it,” she says.

I’m not sure I get it.

“Oh,” that’s all I say.

“My name is MaNgubane, I started here last week, you must be the operational manager who was said to have suffered a

car accident,” she’s staring at me like she’s seen me before and now trying to familiarize herself with my face once more.

“Yes, that’s me,” I say.

“It wasn’t anything bad, it’s pity you sustained some injuries, your uncle was just protecting your baby,” she says.

Now she has my attention, I’m stunned.

“Are you a seer Ma?” I ask.

She smiles and pinches her nose before responding,

“Yeah, you can say that. Are your parents well?”

According to the independent journalist, Sbonga, they’re not on good terms but in good health.

I nod, “They’re well.”

“Tears write good karma mntanami, once you build your happiness on someone else’s tears know that karma has you on records.”

“I’ve never done that,” I say, confused.

“Abaphansi bathukuthele, your mother will single-handedly destroy everything she built on people’s tears and, it will be too late when she realizes that, she will be all alone,” she says.

“What has she done?” I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s wronged more people.

Honestly, I don’t know what’s gotten to my mother’s head.

“There’s nothing you can do except saving the last crumbs of your family after the

storm.” With that said she turns and walks away.

Zothani is pulling up.

I’ve never been so confused in my life.

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

The guests have left, Sekhona just accompanied Nzuzo home, Sbonga has gone to her bedroom under the guise of being tired, she’s under the covers talking to a boy. Busisekile is cleaning her kitchen, humming a song;

“Khuluma nami ngilalele,

Izitha zami zijabhile.”

Babo has been listening, it sounds like the song is directed to him. There’s been so much drama going on and this is not how he wanted to welcome his children home. He simply performed a ceremony for his kids, he didn’t kill anyone. Why is his wife making it look like he killed someone?

He goes to her in the kitchen, grabs a chair and sits.

“MaKhumalo why are we fighting?” he asks.

She carries on with her song, adding whistles between the lyrics.

“Do you doubt their paternity, maybe?”

Babo asks.

She stops and looks at him. No, she's not angry, she's got a resting-bitch face on.

“We are legally married Njomane, any child I bear while I'm your wife is yours. So what are you talking about?” she asks.

“Oh, that's how it is?” He's offended.

“Yeah, don't you know culture? They're all your children, unless if you have some concrete evidence to validate your suspicions.” She challenges him with a stare.

Babo clears his throat, this is stupid, why is he creating more fights.

“I'm sorry Mashobane, it's just that I don't understand why are you so against me taking my kids to the alter whereas you've never had a problem if it's Salabenzi.”

“No Njomane, the problem is you want these children to only love you. Look at what you did to my relationship with Salabenzi, you destroyed it.”

“Don’t you dare pin that on me, I was warning you about trying to sabotage her happiness, you knew she’d choose her baby over you,” Babo says.

“No, you ran your mouth Njomane. But I’m not surprised, you’re now keeping things from me, you’re...”

“Keeping things? You’ve been giving me korobela and I’ve been keeping quiet.

Those things could’ve killed me, what were you going to say to my children?”

The door opens, Sekhona walks in with a defeated look.

“I could have seen you from the gate. What’s really going on? Should I tell Sisi?”

“No, mfan’ wami your mother and I are just going through a phase. Did Nzuzo get home safely?” – Babo.

Sekhona shrugs, “Yeah, but Sis’ Nondu was angry that I took him.”

“Is Nzuzo gold? Mxm!” – MaKhumalo grunts angrily.

Babo shakes his head, he’s exhausted as well.

“Let’s go and watch TV,” he says patting Sekhona’s back.

MaKhumalo turns and looks at them as they leave, then she mumbles under her breaths.

**She takes her phone out of her bra and
dials someone's number.**

It's ringing.

**She heaves a long sigh as the person finally
answers.**

“Mamba, how far?”

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 36

BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

**“They’re getting married Ma’ oledi,”
Mamba says.**

“What?” She cannot believe her ears.

**“Yeah, the woman is Thembelihle Nkosi,
he’s keeping her here for safety reasons and
they will be getting married soon. He’s
taking her as his second wife.” He confirms
her worst fears, out of everything Njomane
could’ve done to disrespect their marriage
he’s choosing this. His lies were piling up
but okay, this she can never accept.**

**“I need you to do me one last favor,” she
says.**

**“No, you still haven’t paid me for this job.
I’m two-timing Magagula here, do you
know how much trouble I could be in if**

they find out I've been giving out information about their patient?"

"Come on, it's untraceable poison, they won't suspect a thing," she begs.

"Ma'oledi you seem to forget who Magagula is. You did not hire me to kill, you wanted information and I've given you, now please send my R5 000," Mamba says.

She sighs, "Listen, I will send you your money, I still need to call my daughter and ask."

"What? Are you trying to tell me you don't have that money?" – Mamba, he's irritated.

"Am I a bank? I said give me time, I will get your money," she says.

Babo quietly walks in to the bathroom but she's sharp enough to hear him and drop

the call. He didn't quite catch the conversation, but he's suspicious.

It takes everything in her not to cause a scene. How dare he thinks of putting her in polygamy? She's the wife and a half. A two-in-one queen, the first and last wife.

"You're up early," she says, cracking a thin smile.

"I want to go and see Salabenzi," Babo says, eyeing her suspiciously.

Busisekile frowns, "Why?"

"She had an accident, I want to see how she's doing," he says.

What he's trying to say is that he's going to Tongaat to turn her against Salo more.

What a traitor of a man! She can't believe

that she once trusted this man with her whole life.

“What time are you coming back?” she asks.

“I can’t say but I will be home by dinner time.”

“Please make sure, we have to give our kids a good picture before they leave. I don’t want them to think we are always fighting,” she says.

Babo chuckles, “But we always do.”

“It’s not the last picture I want them to have of us.” That came out wrong but he’s not paying much attention; she exhales softly in relief. “I will run you a bath,” she says.

“Thank you,” Babo says and walks on to release his morning piss.

As he turns his back Busisekile looks at him from head to toe. What a fine man, it’s a pity he didn’t honor their vows and didn’t appreciate her as his hard-working wife.

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By the time Sbonga and Sekhona wake up she’s made breakfast and laid the table. Her face is bright, she’s smiling nonstop.

Sbonga is the first to come to the table, with her phone in hand as usual.

“This looks like a good morning,” she says looking at her mother suspiciously.

“Yes, it’s a good morning my baby. Pity your father had to leave early, he cannot be with us for breakfast,” Busisekile says, putting a plate in front of her.

“Are you two okay now?” Sbonga asks with her brows knitted.

“Njomane and I are married, we will always make up,” she says, blushing.

Sbonga grunts with disgust. “Please don’t tell me the details, I’m just glad you sorted things out.”

“What details?” Busisekile raises her eyebrows.

“Making up details,” Sbonga says.

“What do you know about those things? You better not embarrass me like Nondu

did to MaNkosi. Stay away from boys and sex,” she says.

Sbonga laughs, “I didn’t say anything about sex, I said making up, which means forgiving each other.”

“You can never be clever than me Sbonga. Never! Drink your tea before it turns cold.”

Sekhona walks in, he’s also surprised to see his mother in this good mood. Before he can ask Sbonga fills him in; “She made up with dad. No more fights now.”

“Oh really? That’s good mom, look how beautiful you look when you’re happy,” he says smiling at his mother.

Busisekile smiles back, “Then your father must make sure that I’m always happy, not this thing of him stressing me out.”

Sekhona looks around, “Is he home?”

“No, he went to check up on your sister, but he promised that he will be home for dinner. Now that’s where you two come in,” she says.

They both look at her curiously.

“I want us to surprise your father with something. He’s been missing you so much, I want him to be happy,” she says.

“We can cook imfino nophuthu, his favourite food,” Sbonga suggests.

“That’s boring,” Sekhona dismisses.

**“What if we bake a cake as well?” –
Sbonga.**

**“That’s better, let’s say you guys bake him
a cake and I fix his guitar.”**

**Busisekile smiles, this is why ‘she’s sending
them to expensive schools’, they’re fast-
thinkers and so clever. This farewell dinner
will be special.**

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AUNT TEEKAY

Mamba walks in with her lunch.

**Surprisingly they get along very well, even
though she still wishes Khulekani can come**

back. Mamba is just a talkative, harmless guy who claims to have taken lives, pulled heists and got away with bank robberies.

“Yoh suster, I’m craving a cigarette so bad inyanga yimbi,” he says dumping himself on the couch. He’s hung-over and broke despite all the millions he claims to have had committed horrendous crimes for.

“I thought you had money Mamba,” Aunt Teekay says.

He sighs, “I do but the bank won’t let me withdraw it, my affidavit expired.”

“Oh, shame!” Aunt Teekay says sympathetically, she’s trying hard not to laugh.

“But I have someone who owes me R5000, they will pay me soon,” he says, scratching

the side of his face. He's broke, it's written all over his face.

Aunt Teekay checks her pockets, finds some coins and gives him. His eyes widen, he looks at her with his lips stretched out.

“Hawu sistera, I wasn't asking for money but thank you, I will pay you back triple this amount. By the way, what kind of bag do you like? Prada or Louis Vuitton?”

Aunt Teekay laughs, “I'm good, don't get me a bag.”

“I would've gotten it today, my friend owns the Prada company,” he says.

Aunt Teekay shakes her head, she doesn't want any stolen bags.

He stands up, smiling ear to ear.

“You’re kind yazi, I don’t know how you got into this mess,” he says.

Aunt Teekay frowns, “What mess?”

“Huh? Nothing, I’m talking about this living arrangement,” he says, pinching his nose.

She’s not a child, it’s clear he was talking about something else, he’s a good liar but this time he missed.

“Mamba what are you talking about?” She asks, more firm.

He starts scratching his head and avoiding eye contact.

“Who have you been talking to?” Her instincts tell her Khulekani. Could it be that he told Mamba about her issues? She didn’t tell him anything deep because she knows how talkative he is.

“Eyy please don’t kill me sistera, but your man’s wife has been asking questions,” he says.

She almost pee on herself. Busisekile knows that she’s alive and she’s here?

“How does she know?” she asks, her voice almost trembling.

“I don’t know, I refused to give her information.”

“Why did you refuse?” – Aunt Teekay.

“Because my loyalty lies with you.” He's obviously lying.

“Okay, you can go,” she says.

He heads to the door relieved.

Aunt Teekay is restless back in the house, she’s pacing up and down, she has to figure

something out. If Busisekile knows it's either Babo felt for her tricks and spilled the beans or he doesn't know and his life is in danger as well.

Mamba is her only key. She has to use him to know what's happening on the other side.

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SALO MHLONGO

My father is here, he surprised me with a visit. Zothani is on his way, which puts me in an awkward position again. I don't want him to think we are living together, even

though I know he doesn't have a problem with Zothani, he trusts him with me.

"Your mother wants me to be home for dinner," he says.

"Is that even a good thing?" I ask.

He laughs, "You can never know with your mother, but I think she cares about what the children think of us, she wants us to be a happy family for their sake."

"That's what I used to want too, but now I don't know. Maybe they deserve to know how unhappy you guys are, just in case there's a divorce happening in the future." I've made peace with it, they're both not what I thought they were. He's a cheater, my mother is a dark-hearted woman who only

cares about what she benefits from people and gives no damn about their happiness.

“I won’t divorce your mother, maybe I’d take a second wife,” he says.

My eyes pop out. Something about his face tells me he’s actually not joking.

“A second wife from where?” I ask.

“From anywhere. Would you be comfortable with that?” He looks at me curiously.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I just don’t think one person can love two people at once. Do you even think my mother would allow you not to sleep in her

bedroom? I don't think so, that's Busisekile kayi-one," I say.

"She'd have to adjust, I'm no longer that man she could keep in her bedroom the whole day," he says with a low chuckle.

"So you are thinking of taking another wife?" I ask. I'm shocked by this.

"Yes, but there's a lot that I need to fix before I get to that point," he says.

Wow, that's all I can say.

I think Busisekile will kill someone this time around.

"Tomorrow would've been your aunt's birthday," he randomly says looking at the portrait hanging on the wall.

I know about my aunt, they were close, I don't think anyone can ever fill her gap in his life.

His phone rings, he takes his eyes off the portrait and answers. It sounds like he's talking to my mother.

"Yes, I'm with her," he says and looks at me.

Gosh, what does she want? I'm mad at her but I cannot give her any disrespect because she's still my mother, hence I'm just keeping my distance from her.

"Your mother wants to talk to you," baba says.

I take the phone and mentally practice some fake respect.

"Hello Ma," I answer.

“Hi my princess, how are you?”

“I’m good Ma, wena?”

“Not good at all, I’m owing stokvel ladies R5000,” she says.

“So much money? What did you do with it?”

“I bought grocery and fixed some things around the house,” she says.

“I don’t have it, wait until I get paid.”

“But you have savings Salo, I need the money before the end of the day. Give it to your father, otherwise my life is over,” she says.

“Relax, your life won’t be over, I will pay it back.”

“Today?” she asks.

Is she deaf?

“No, when I get paid...”

She drops the call.

Wow!

I look at baba, shocked.

“She needs money?” he asks.

“Yeah, and she’s angry because I said I don’t have it,” I say.

“Don’t worry, I will give her that money.”

Oh, Patrice Motsepe wena!

“Smangele would’ve loved you. You’re strong-headed like her.” What a sudden change of topic! “Next year we should throw her a birthday party, that’s if I’m still around,” he says and chuckles.

“You’d be around, we will do the party with your second wife,” I say.

“She’s a light version of your aunt, it would be great. I really don’t want Smangele to be forgotten,” he says.

Zothani walking in disturbs us, I was keen on hearing more about my late aunt and the second wife who’s a light version of her.

“Sanibona,” – Zothani.

He looks frightened, he’s carrying two boxes of pizza, he didn’t expect to find me chilling with my father.

“Ntanga!” baba says.

That’s a strange thing to say.

“How are you baba?” Zothani asks.

“No, don't worry, call me Delani,” baba says.

I frown and look at Zothani. Are they that close?

“Baba I was just trying to go with the flow,” he says.

Okay, I think this one is between them. I take the pizzas from him to the kitchen. My father will have it before he leaves. We have to chow the Zungu money.

When I get back to the lounge they cut the conversation and look at me.

“Hhayi bo, keep talking,” I say.

Zothani clears his throat, “Baba was just telling me that I have to treat you good. I’m doing that, right?”

“No,” I say.

“Wow!”

“Do you want me to lie?”

I’m just pulling his leg but he doesn’t see it.

“You two stop playing, I’m serious wena ntanga yami, don’t play with my daughter.

I also need her lobola paid in full since you’ve already turned her into your wife,” – baba.

“Baba only if you knew that I’m the wife here, she’s the husband,” Zothani says.

I roll my eyes.

**“Sounds like she took after her mother,”
baba says.**

I’m offended.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 37

For once Sbonga left her phone in the room and helped out with dinner. Everything came out brilliantly; they have everything that Babo loves. His roasted sweet-potato, imfino cooked with Knorrox cubes and lots of onions, and uphuthu softly made the

way he loves it. Sekhona did everything to make this dinner successful as well, he was running errands and giving suggestions where needed, but one thing he won't do is to indulge in this type of food. Somewhere, somehow, Sbonga got the money to buy them both pizza. Their mother will help her husband eat this, they're seated on the other side of the table with their pizza.

“Is it my birthday?” Babo asks. He's been confused ever since he walked in. He knew his wife wanted them to have a normal dinner wearing fake smiles for the children so that

they leave with a good picture tomorrow, but he expected nothing like this.

“Dad please don’t tell me you don’t know when your birthday is,” Sbonga says.

He laughs, “I know it, I’m just surprised why you cooked all this for me.”

“It was mom’s idea,” Sbonga says.

He turns and looks at Busisekile.

Surprisingly she has a genuine smile on her face.

“Thank you MaKhumalo,” he says, flashing a smile back.

“No, thank you Njomane. You put up with my craziness and love our children unconditionally. We’ve been fighting a lot lately and I just realized how much time we waste fighting instead of showing each other love and loving these big heads we brought onto this earth.”

“Big heads?” Sbonga frowns.

“I’m talking to your father, have some manners,” Busisekile says and looks at her husband again. “We have come too far Njomane, look at the children we’ve raised, let’s stop fighting over stupid things and enjoy having finally gotten rid of them in the house.”

He can’t help but laugh, they’re mumbling under their breaths unhappily.

“You’re right, no more fighting,” he says holding her hand.

Busisekile smiles, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Have I told you how beautiful you are?” he asks.

Sekhona is the first to raise his juice glass, he wants to do a toast.

“We are making a toast,” he says.

Babo has no drink in front of him, he raises one sweet-potato. Busisekile raises her cup of Trinco tea, “Sheez bantabami!”

“To old people’s love, cheers!” – Sbonga.

Sekhona laughs, “Stop being jealous. To us, our beautiful parents, and our pregnant sister in Tongaat!”

“Was that necessary?” Babo asks laughing.

They all indulge in their dinner, there’s a rare peaceful atmosphere, everyone is laughing.

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After the kids have gone to bed, Babo stays behind and helps his wife clear the table. Dinner was great, they had honest laughs over silly things and confessed love to each other, but it could've been all just for 'the good picture.'

"Your feet must be hurting now, I will give you a foot massage," he's testing the water.

"You always try to break my toes with your massage, no thanks," she says with a low chuckle. She's not pretending, she must've meant what she said about them making peace.

"Thanks for today, I don't know when was the last time I was so happy with my family. I wish Salabenzi could've been here as well," he says.

She dries her hands and turns to give him full attention.

“I got obsessed with having control and things always going my way. I didn’t realize I was pushing you away, I’m glad it wasn’t too late for me to see my mistakes. Thank you Njomane for putting up with me,” she says.

His ears have yearned to hear these words for a long time.

“We got carried away and blinded from reality,” he says with a heavy exhalation.

She nods, her hands are on his chest, she’s staring up at him.

“I wish we can take some of the stuff we did back. I can do absolutely anything to

undo what we did to Thembelihle, MaNkosi and our daughter,” she says.

“Let’s go to the bedroom, you will finish here in the morning.” He pulls her away. It’s been hard doing things behind her back, he never thought there’d be a day where she’d see things like him. If they can do this together things could be sorted faster than he thought.

He shuts the bedroom door, Busisekile sits on the bed and looks at him curiously.

He takes his shoes off first, then sits next to her.

“I know you think you are a man of this house, but I’m a man, it’s my responsibility to fix wherever I see damage,” he says.

She frowns, then chuckles softly.

“Okay, did you fix any of it?”

He nods, “I’m glad your eyes are finally opening as well. I did not kill Thembelihle, I couldn’t go through with it and unfortunately she had already told MaNkosi about what we’ve done to her family. I had to take a step back and do some introspection, at that time you were still obsessed with getting rid of Thembelihle and doing things the old way, so I didn’t tell you the truth, I focused on making things right.”

She stares at him, blinks a couple of times then says,

“That’s so amazing Njomane, wow!”

“Yeah, we cannot do this forever, somebody had to stop it.”

“I’m glad you did. How far are you now?”

“I’m making plans of doing things right regarding MaNkosi’s alter. It’s something we should work around as a family, then confessions and apologies.”

“That’s a good start, I’m so proud of you,” she says.

He looks at her and smiles, “No more korobela now, okay?”

“Trust me, I’d never do anything like that again, I don’t want us to keep fighting, I’m going to be an obedient wife from now on, I will let you take the lead,” she says.

“I still need you by my side,” he takes her hand and brings it to his lips and kisses it.

“Okay, I will be by your side then. No more secrets?”

He nods, “Yes, no more secrets.”

“What about Thembelihle? Are you still seeing her?”

“What?” He swallows hard before he breaks a short nervous chuckle. “I’m not seeing her, I wouldn’t keep hurting you like that, I just helped her because you know she’s MaNkosi’s sister and we did them wrong,” he says.

“Mmmmm,” she shifts her eyes away.

“MaKhumalo come on, trust me, I have been faithful to you. I have no reason to cheat on you, it was just a moment of weakness, you’re the wife and a half,” he says.

She gazes at him softly and cracks a thin smile.

He cups her face, “You’re my day one, I love you with every piece of me. Look at the beautiful children you gave me, if I could, I’d marry you over and over again.”

She smiles, adoringly staring at his eyes.

Yeah he’s sweet sometimes, only if he was honest, not weak and full of betrayal and stupidity.

“We should get in bed,” she says.

He gets under the covers with her and shifts closer to have his body grinding against hers. “Lisavuka phela MaKhumalo, you can’t just ignore me,” he says.

“We have children in the house, you know how sharp Sbonga is. How about tomorrow night?” she asks.

“I won’t make any noise, I promise,” he begs.

“Tomorrow Njomane, have some control.”

He heaves a deep sigh, tomorrow it is!

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NONDUMEZULU

It’s finally Monday, I have a Dr Khan to call, basically my future right depends on her. I don’t know how she’s going to analyze, challenge and counsel me. I don’t know if we will get along, if I will cope without my son around, but here it goes, I’m pressing the call button.

It's going through, I'm lying in my bed with my breath held.

"Dr Khan speaking, how may I help you?"

That nasal voice? No, we won't get along.

"Good morning, my name is Nondumezulu Mhlongo, I got your number from..."

"Dr Manzini," she says, cutting me off.

"Yes," I say, in full control of my tone.

"I'm happy to receive your call. Are you able to come to my office tomorrow at 11 am so that we can have a chat and make arrangements for our week?"

"Yes, I can definitely come," I say.

"Okay, I will send you the address then and see you tomorrow," she says.

"Thank you," I end the call.

So that was the rest of it, tomorrow I have to go to Umhlali again, I will be there the whole week and if Dr Khan decides that I'm sane enough to hold a job I will permanently move there. It's official that I no longer work at Shoprite, if this whole thing fails I will be jobless.

Nkalipho promised me accommodation, he's the next person I'm calling.

"Babe I'm at work," he picks up.

"Oh, sorry. When should I call?"

"It's fine babe, we can talk, what's up?"

"I just spoke to Dr Khan, tomorrow I have to go and see her."

“Okay, we will go and see the place later today.

“You found it already?” I ask.

“I had the whole weekend to sort it out. I really need to get back to work babe, I have a 12pm deadline,” he says.

“Okay babe. Where’s your site? Can I come and drop you some lunch?” I’m trying to be a romantic girlfriend.

“No sthandwa sami, I will see you later, ngiyakuthanda uyezwa?” It sounds dismissive, not deep at all. I think I’m just disturbing him.

I drop the call and go back to my nap. At least I don’t have to stress about accommodation, dating a monied guy is slowly paying off.

It's around 1pm when he calls me and tells me to get ready. I waste no time, I get into my jumpsuit and sneakers and do some touch-ups on my face. Nzuzo is home, he thinks he's coming with me wearing the T-shirt I bought him when he was five years old, it now fits only above his stomach. He's wearing crocs in his feet.

He comes in as I brush my hair and pulls my arm.

"No Nzuzo, I'm busy," I stand my grounds.

"Lume's car," he says, still grabbing me.

"I'm going to the interview baby, you can't come," I say.

"I'm going to the interview." He says like he's challenging me to say otherwise.

“Okay, you’re going as well, go and tell Gogo to give you a bath.” I will run out as soon as he disappears. He doesn’t always give me problems when I leave, today he just feels like messing with me.

He runs out, I do the last touch-ups and grab my purse. I stand at the door and check the coast, “Ma are you giving Nzu a bath to come with me to the interview?”

“What interview?”

“Ma!” She’s frustrating me, this is not hard to figure out.

“I don’t know, Nzuzo is not here.”

What does she mean? I walk out of the bedroom and look around. I can’t see him, I call his name, he doesn’t reply.

I take out my phone and call Nkalipho. For this child's sake I hope Nkalipho tells me he didn't go to him outside looking like that.

"I'm outside," he says as he picks up.

"I know. Have you seen Nzuzo outside the gate?" I ask.

"He's here with me," he says.

I'm going to kill that child!

I go to my mother's room and tell her I will bring Nzuzo back and then leave to go and see the place I'm going to live in. She's busy knitting, it's my first time seeing her doing some handwork.

Nzuzo is comfortable on the front seat with his cropped T-shirt, ngiyalingwa la. I open the door and tell him to get out.

“He says he’s coming with us,” Nkalipho says.

“No, he’s not,” I say and pull his hand.

“Come baby, gogo will make you juice.”

He pulls his hand back.

Okay, this could end in a fight, I don’t know what’s gotten into him today.

“Let’s go with him, we are coming back anyway,” – Nkalipho.

“He can’t come dressed like this,” I say and beg Nzuzo to get out of the car.

“Babe stop overreacting,” Nkalipho says pulling him back.

Doesn't he see how Nzuzo is dressed or he's out here trying to embarrass me as well?

“Okay then, he must go and change. People are going to look at me, not him or you. Both of you represent me, if you look bad in public it's me who's going to suffer.”

His eyes widen. He's laughing, I don't know what's funny.

“We represent you? Who are you?” he asks.

Is he from Mars? I'm responsible for how they look in public when they're with me.

I don't answer him, I gently hold Nzuzo's hand,

“Let's go and change you to a cuter T-shirt and shoes, then you will come with me and Lume,” I beg.

He turns his eyes to Nkalipho, he needs some kind of assurance from him, all of a sudden I'm not trustworthy.

“We are all going, go with mommy,” he says.

Only then Nzuzo opens his arms for me. I have to carry him, I pray my hip doesn't break.

My mother laughs when we walk in.

“He's tired of you always leaving him behind,” she says.

I'm not always leaving Nzuzo behind, he's just cheeky today. I put him in clean clothes and return to the car.

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I was expecting a backroom, we are in Shakaskraal, Ocean View Road. But we drive through the gate and park in front of a house. He carries Nzuzo, we head to the door. He opens with the key, that's when I realize we are not here for some backroom.

“Whose house is this?” I ask.

“Your landlord is Thobekile, she lives in Pretoria, owns two puppies and some detergent company. Are you satisfied?”

He's walking in.

“How much is the rent?” I'm loving the place but at some point I will start paying rent from my own pocket if I get the job.

“Does it matter? Do you like it? The other bedroom can be Nzuzo’s, he will be here every weekend,” he says.

“I love it but...” He walks away to check something else before I finish. The kitchen is fully fitted, floors are tiled, there’s an open plan lounge, bathroom and toilet, and two spacious bedrooms. I’m already feeling the spirit of freedom.

He comes back and puts Nzuzo on the floor.

“It’s safe and closer to Umhlali. Are you happy?”

“Yeah I’m happy, thank you,” I say.

He takes the keys out of his pocket and gives them to me. I shove them inside my purse and open the drawers to see if the

previous tenant didn't leave any money or jewelry.

"Can I have the spare key?" he asks.

I turn with my brows knitted. "Why?"

He chuckles, "Just so I can have them."

"So you want to come and go as you want?" I ask jokingly but I mean it a little bit. Had it been me who was paying rent for the house he wouldn't have had the audacity to ask for the spare keys.

"I gave you the spare keys to my house as well. There are no secrets between us, it's not a problem if we have access to each other's places," he says.

"I guess you're right, I will give you later, we have to check out my bedroom." I pull Nzuzo, we head to the bedroom. I feel like

this is going to be my favourite place in the house, there's so much space and great window view. I can wear my gown, hold a cup of tea and stand by the window like rich women in the morning.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 38

AUNT TEEKAY

She has access to Mamba's spare phone. She doesn't trust him but she needs him on her side. It's a new-looking cracked

Samsung phone, God knows where he stole it from. She's calling Delani to seek clarity about some of the things Mamba told her. He finally answers after three trials.

"I cannot talk right now," he's whispering. It sounds like he's in a bathroom.

Busisekile must be around.

"It's important, make a plan," she says.

"Maybe in a few days, I really can't right now."

Oh gosh, she's dealing with the fawn again!

"Look, she knows that I'm alive and I'm here," she says. She's whispering too, that woman must've gotten her with her spells as well.

"I told her," he says.

He's just kidding, right?

"You did what?"

"I told her, she's on board, she has realized that we did you wrong."

"How?" She's confused right now.

"Let's take a break, I will be in touch with Magagula, I think it's safe for you to go home now but I will talk to your sister and arrange everything," he says.

"No Delani, she's fooling you again, she's not on board, she hired someone to keep an eye on me and even tried to poison me," she says.

There's a sigh; he doesn't believe her.

“We talked last night, about everything. Well, not about us getting married, we will get to that later,” he says.

Ok, she sees it now. He told Busisekile what she already knew, he was just confirming it. She’s in danger and this man is too stupid to realize it.

“She’s changed, she’s the wife I fell in love with, give us time to work things out and fix what we ruined. Okay? Please don’t call me, I will communicate everything with Magagula,” he says.

“Delani are you serious? She’s lying to you, I know she...” He drops the call, just great! She throws the phone away and paces around the room. She needs to come up with a plan, ASAP. No, actually she needs

to get out of here. Mamba is two-faced, he'd do anything for money. Now Delani has backed out from the deal. She cannot expect much from MaNkosi, she's just an old woman who believes God's miracles solve everything.

She's packing her bags and leaving this place.

Mamba walks in as she packs the last luggage, obviously he's shocked to see her ending his job contract just like that.

“Ayy sistera, what's going on now?” he asks looking at the bags on the floor.

“Your phone is on the table. I don't know if it's you or me who have to return the house keys to Magagula's wife? Which one is it by

the way?” She’s rolling her fleece blanket and fitting it into the plastic bag.

“Hhayi-bo sistera, you cannot leave without Magagula approving.”

She looks at him, laughs and shakes her head.

“I can, I wasn’t held hostage, they were just accommodating me until it’s safe to go back home. It’s safe now, there’s no reason for me to stay here,” she says.

“You’re serious! What about my job as your guard? I have a family to feed, everything is my responsibility at home,” he says and blows out a huge sigh with his hands on the waist.

“Breadwinner, you? Come on Mamba, you have your stashes of money hidden

somewhere, hundreds of people owing you and millions in the bank. And I'm sure they won't fire you, this is a big family, with patients coming in and out everyday, they'll allocate you somewhere else," she says.

Yeah, she's right. He's not a financially struggling man.

"Let me go and notify the elders then," he says rubbing his hands together.

Thembelihle fakes a grin, "Thank you."

He walks out with the stolen phone of his and runs across the road to go notify the first wife of Magagula, she will know what to do.

Khulekani is the second son of MaMthethwa, he's driving to his mother's house with his father's van. He doesn't have a great relationship with anyone, not even his mother. It's not always them, his family, even though he's not treated as important as everyone, but it's partly because of his personality too. He's not that fond of forming and maintaining relationships. It's too much hard work for him. Words get twisted, and when they're twisted lies are created, then you have to fight for your reputation. It's better he doesn't say anything, doesn't cling on anyone, and always guards his peace.

He's climbed out and walking towards the garage door when his mother, followed by

Mamba, spring out of the front door
screaming his name.

He stands with a frown. They're making
their way towards him.

"It's good you're home," MaMthethwa
says, panting as if she's just ran 10km.

"Okay?" He raises his eyebrow in question.

This, MaMthethwa calls bad attitude, even
in his thirties he cannot stop doing it.

"Your brother said you have to drive the
young MaNkosi home," she says.

"Which brother?" The eyebrow is up, this
time he's annoyed.

"Zwelakhe, please hurry before it gets late
for her," his mother says.

He would've said no if Thembelihle wasn't someone he knows, Zwelakhe has no right to give him orders. He turns back to the van, meeting Thembelihle wasn't something he planned on doing, it was better he shifted back to his world and forgot about the often-opinionated woman who's about to become someone's second wife. He's had his fair share of women, the last thing he needs is thinking with his dick.

“Grootman can I get a lift?”

He turns, that's Mamba, this one is always everywhere.

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Their eyes meet as he walks in behind Mamba. She's sitting on the couch with her bags next to her legs. Something flitters across her eyes for a second. It's fear; she didn't expect to see Khulekani here, she was told he left. But she doesn't entertain it for too long, she stands up, her eyes have shifted to Mamba.

"Grootman will drive you home," Mamba says.

Again, her and Khulekani look at each other.

"Hi," she says.

Khulekani nods.

She realizes that's all she will get and turns to pick her bags. Mamba rushes to help her, he's trying to score himself a few last coins.

“Can I help?” Khulekani asks.

“No, I’m fine.” She walks out first, she’s not herself today, she’s visibly fuming.

Khulekani locks while Mamba leads her to the van.

They load the bags at the back. Khulekani follows behind slowly, he’s trying to collect his nerves and prepare for the trip. He’s about to be with her for approximately an hour on the road. They have unfinished business, he knows that she was expecting him that night.

He sees her handing Mamba some money.

They seem to get along more than him and her did. He goes to his door and climbs inside.

Oh shit, he should've opened the door for her first.

Mamba does the Lord's work and closes the door for her. They're waving at each other. For a second her angry face dissolves into a smile.

"I hope to see you on TV soon," she says.

Mamba grins, putting his bucket hat on.

"You will sistera, there on Top Billing," he says.

Khulekani realizes it's just one of those Mamba's stupid lies and starts the engine.

They drive the first 10 minutes in silence. She's back at being angry and stuck in her own thoughts. Khulekani is struggling with

the right approach; how he's going to crack their first conversation.

Then he clears his throat, "I didn't think you'd be going so soon."

It's not soon, she's stayed for a long time.

"Oh," she says with zero engaging interest.

She's putting him in an awkward position because he's not the one to often initiate conversations.

"What happened?" he asks.

"Busisekile happened," she says.

Who the hell is that? He keeps his eyes on the road, maybe this conversation doesn't...

"I should've known she'd get him again.

This time it's not even witchcraft, just mind

games, she's playing him and he's too stupid to see it. By the time she realizes that woman is a witch at heart it will be too late, I'm telling you."

Well, that was mouthful. Only if he could relate and understand why she's so angry.

"So you're going to him?" he asks. For some reason he's been feeling offish towards Mhlongo despite him being his father's friend. He can't stand the thought of him marrying Thembelihle as his second wife. Maybe it's because he hates polygamy.

"No, I'm going home, to my mother's house. I will figure out my life there in the company of my ancestors," she says and blows a deep sigh.

“Is it safe there?” he asks.

She turns and looks at him with raised eyebrows.

He feels the stare and clears his throat.

“You were hidden because it wasn’t safe home, right?” he asks.

“She’s a witch, not a gangster,” she says.

“But that was enough to send you into hiding.” He’s frustrating her even more.

She throws her hands up, “I don’t care, I’m not going to run, I’m done!”

“I do care,” he says.

Awkward glances!

He clears his throat, “He’s her husband, not everyone wants to share a man, why are you so sure that you are safe?”

“I’m not marrying him,” she says.

Okay, this is new and refreshing.

“You’re not marrying him?” he asks.

“No, I’m done with him. I’m not going to save a man who doesn’t want to be saved, I only care about my sister and my niece now.”

He wants to tell her that she’s making the right decision. Polygamy is not an arrangement anyone should insert themselves in, he knows this from experience.

“I figured you were no longer available that night,” he says.

Thembelihle holds her breath for a second.

Are they really going back to that today?

She chooses not to comment, that will give him hints that she's not ready.

“I didn't want to be a home-wrecker,” he says with a little teasing smirk.

How uncomfortable is this! She blows out a low sigh.

“But I can wreck some things,” he says.

“What things?” She looks at him.

“Do you really want to know?”

Why is this question sounding like a trap?

“Yes,” she says.

This is testing the devil.

“Then let's head to kwaNhliziyo ngiyise.”

She looks at him, he's serious.

No, she's too old for such games. What would people think of her disappearing with Magagula's estranged son? She's not obsessed with being perfect to the society, but this would just be too inappropriate.

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

It was “until death do us apart” and she's really honored those vows. In fact both of them did, despite their mistakes and time to time cheating, they stuck together down to this day. It's not poison, just a boost from her uncle that's going to push him off his limits. His favorite human, princess of

his heart, will be calling his name in the deep hours of the night. Her picture was cut into small pieces and inserted inside the bottle of muthi and thrown inside the Thukela river. Tonight images of her drowning in the river will flash before her brother's eyes, as if she's still alive and crying for help. There will be no one to blame, Busisekile will be a heartbroken wife mourning for her husband. His body will be covered in the river; a drowning case like any other.

He's sitting on the couch, his eyes are glued on the TV. Busisekile walks in with his food, she puts it in front of him and then sits next to him.

“What’s the weather tomorrow?” she asks.

“It’s raining,” he says.

“At least I will be indoors. What about you?”

He looks at her, “I have no plans, I will be home spending time with my wife.”

“Amazing!” she kisses his cheek and shifts her eyes to the news on TV. Two boys drowned in the river in Limpopo, how almost-coincidental these news are.

“That’s so unfortunate, I cannot imagine what the parents are going through,” Babo sympathizes. He still hasn’t touched his food, which is unlike him because he likes his food warm.

“Eat before it turns cold,” Busisekile says.

His eyes are on TV, he's dramatically affected by the death of the boys, you'd swear he knew them. "Some rivers need to be fenced to protect the community," he says.

Busisekile scoffs, "How about people stop going to the rivers? It's not like rivers come to them."

He knows she's heartless, he pays no attention and keeps his eyes on TV until the anchor reads other news.

Then he looks at her, "I need to call my kids and tell them to be safe."

Really now?

"Stop being dramatic Njomane, that happened in Limpopo, our kids are safe."

“I just want to speak to them, you know they don’t watch the news.”

“You will talk to them in the morning, there’s no need to scare them, eat your food.”

She wins; he takes a deep breath and picks his plate and starts eating.

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The clock just ticked 1:33am, Busisekile is snoring softly next to her sweaty husband. He’s in the middle of a nightmare, he keeps mumbling things and kicking his feet.

“Smangele,” he unconsciously calls his late sister’s name.

Busisekile slowly opens her eyes and looks at him. He's fighting a deep battle in his sleep, she shakes his shoulder.

"Njomane yini?"

Babo wakes up with his eyes bulging out. He looks around and spots nothing familiar.

"Hhayi-bo Njomane?" – Busisekile.

He gets out of bed, his whole body is covered in sweat.

"Smangele! Smangele! I'm coming," he's yelling.

"Njomane come back to bed, there's no Smangele here."

"I'm coming dadewethu, hold on!" He's heading towards the door.

Busisekile gets off bed and follows him out. She's calling him back to bed, he's not hearing anything, he's only worried about Smangele.

He walks out of the main door, runs out of the gate and disappears.

Busisekile is standing on the door step with her hands on the hips.

“Njomane you can't leave me with all this property. All to myself? This is too much for me.” She steps back inside the house, looks around the kitchen and then proceeds to the lounge.

She throws herself on the couch, lifts her feet to the coffee table and stretches her arms to the sides. “Amafa angaka bakithi Njomane!”

It's too early to inform MaNkosi and the neighbors. Right now it's still just a case of sleep-walking.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 39

A few minutes after diving into the river something grabs his foot. He's under the water, not breathing and fighting to stay alive. He has no control over his body, his body is following the lead of the thing grabbing his leg.

He should be dead by now. He's been under the water for way too long.

Finally his back touches the sand, there's air coming into his nose. His eyes are still close though, it still feels like he's in a dream.

He hears his brother's voice;

“Your time hasn't come brother. You cannot leave the kids alone.”

He's in so much pain; physically and emotionally.

“I really want to come, please.”

“No, you cannot come and leave your mess behind. Your son is too young to carry your sins, you have to stay and fix your mess.”

“I’m...I’m not happy brother. I don’t want to go back, I want eternal peace.”

“You can’t cause havoc and want peace.”

“Please brother, I’m begging you. Please!”

Silence.

“Brother?”

Nothing.

He opens his eyes, reality slowly kicks in. It’s super dark where he is, he’s wet and injured on his ankles. He looks around, he cannot see the way back home. There’s only one narrow path he can see. He crawls and follows it until he spots a human figure digging something, probably some roots.

He wants to ask for help but his voice doesn't come out.

He gets closer, his voice seems to be building up.

“Please...help...me,” he stutters, his whole body is shaking.

“Njomane???”

It's Magagula, he came here to dig some roots...

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NONDUMEZULU

Nkalipho took a day off work to drive me to my first meeting with Dr Khan. Later I have to go and buy a bed, I will buy more stuff when I'm certain that I have the job. My emotions are all over the place, I should be happy that I even have this glimpse of hope, but I'm indifferent.

I think Nkalipho is starting to know me better.

He calls my name before I open the door and asks if I'm ready.

"Yeah, I'm ready," I say with a slight shrug.

He doesn't say anything but stares. Stares long enough for both his eyes to start losing alignment. He told me it was only one eye. I'm staring back at him, trying to give him

wrong impression of whatever he's trying to read.

“What is it?” I've lost the staring battle.

“You're moody,” he says.

“What are you talking about? I'm not moody.”

“Okay then, let me see you laugh.”

Hhayi-bo is he mad? Since when one has to laugh to prove that they're not moody.

“Laugh for what?” I ask.

“Baby!” He blows out a low sigh.

“Fine, I'm not in the best mood but I'm not going mess this up. I will listen and agree to whatever she says,” I say.

“It’s not about agreeing, but understanding and opening your heart to change,” he says.

“Now you’re an expert of therapy?” I ask.

“See, you’re in a crappy mood,” he says.

I just sigh. Really, I’m not going to get there and act crazy.

He opens his door and comes to mine. He helps me out and keeps me in his arms and only lets me off when I release a deep sigh in exhaustion. He lifts my face and brushes his lips gently against mine.

“I’m fine baby,” I tell him.

“Ngiyakuthanda, uNzuzo uyakuthanda, just know that and believe that you’re doing your best. Look at how beautiful you are, hey.” He pokes my cheek with his finger.

He's got me, I'm smiling.

"Are you going to wait here?" I ask.

"Yes. Where would I go without you?"

"What if I take long?"

"I will wait."

A man who doesn't mind waiting for you; that's every girl's dream. I kiss his lips and give him a little spank before snatching my purse.

"What the fuck?!" He's laughing, there's a little hint of being uncomfortable.

"What did I do?" I ask.

"You can't spank me, worse in public."

I laugh and walk away, heading to the block of offices. Now that I know he doesn't like being spanked in public, I will

stop doing it. I'm kidding, I will be doing it more.

I got lost but I was able to find the right office in time. I'm on time, Dr Khan looks pleased to see me walking in. I imagined someone old, this one looks like she's in her early 30s, she's a Muslim.

"I'm glad you made it," she says offering a me a seat.

This is a very cozy office, it feels like a safe place. I'm sitting comfortably on the guest couch, she's sitting on the chair, briefly telling me about herself. She's just working on getting me calm, which is working. She's a friendly person, not uptight and nosy as I pictured her to be.

“Do you know why Dr Manzini asked you to see me?” she asks.

I break a short chuckle and say, “He thinks I have a bad attitude.”

“What do you think about that?” she asks.

“Everyone has down hours, I’m not a bad person,” I say.

“Having a bad attitude doesn’t make you a bad person. Every emotion and reaction stems from certain thoughts. I want to ask you what is usually your ultimate thought?”

Phewww! It has started, I was not even aware.

“It’s not going to work,” I tell her.

She’s well trained, her face stays neutral in whatever I say.

“Why do you think like that?” she asks.

“Because I’m not a person who usually have things working out for her,” I say.

“I understand you’ve had hard times and you don’t have much faith left. But that’s not a good way of thinking. I want to help you channel more positivity into your thoughts, you have to be able to function and co-exist with your colleagues.”

“Colleagues? I may not even get the job,” I say.

Her face remains neutral but the look gently tells me that I’m doing it again.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be sorry, what I need you to do is to come and see me tomorrow and two

following days. We will work on it, you will be fine,” she says.

“I will come,” I emphasize with a nod.

I like her, she’s very chilled and easy to talk to.

We arrange time for my next appointment, I leave feeling lighter.

My driver is still parked where I left him.

He opens the door, climbs out and leans by the door as I walk down to the parking area.

“It was awesome,” I say, still at a distance.

That look on his face?

“You don’t believe me?” I ask standing in front of him.

“I do, it’s just that...never mind.” He pulls me and hugs me.

I’ve been getting a lot of hugs today.

We get inside the car, I’m in a good mood, I want to talk and crack jokes.

But he’s not, he looks rather uneasy; his fingers are tapping on the wheel restlessly.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“No, I’m just being stupid. You probably remembered the pill, right?”

Okay, what pill? I’m looking at him, confused.

“Babe remember when the condom broke and you had to rush home. Then next morning we were fighting or something, I

remember that I didn't manage to buy it for you."

For a second or two my heart stopped beating. I don't know whether to be angry at him or myself. I did not get the pill, I did not remember anything about it. It just slipped my mind and now I'm open to two possible realities.

"Did you forget as well?" he asks.

I look at him, my hands are shaking.

"I can't be pregnant, Nzuzo is too young."

I'm close to tears. Out of all bad things that can happen to me, that would drive me straight to depression.

"You're not pregnant," he says.

Now he's a special doctor who dictates pregnancy just from looking.

“But Nkalipho how did you not feel the condom burst?” All this is his fault. I didn’t even get an orgasm that day, I can’t be pregnant from useless sex.

“Come on Nondu, I didn’t do it on purpose. I do want to have kids with you some day, but right now I’m happy being a Lume to Nzuzo and building my relationship with you. It was an accident, I could’ve controlled the damage but I was caught in the moment and failed to do so.” He’s good at defending his actions, but not so good when it time to pull out before nutting even when he knows he broke the condom.

**“Is it too early to take a pregnancy test?”
he asks.**

“What if it comes back positive? What then? I’d rather not know,” I say.

“How is that going to help you?”

I give him a look. How is him questioning me going to help?

“Let’s go,” I say.

We are heading back home to get my bags, I still have to shop for a bed and a few other house necessities. I’m going to shut out the possibility of me being pregnant. I’m not going to think about it, I want to focus on my therapy and getting a job.

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Nkalipho fetches Nzuzo from school. My bags are ready, my mom packed me some food to take with me. I have tied plastic bags filled with rice, baked beans, samp and a few tins of fish. Mam' Busi would laugh over this, she already thinks we eat fish for breakfast, lunch and supper everyday.

Nzuzo walks in with his backpack and some books in his hands. Nkalipho has been parked down the road, at this point he should be familiar with a few faces on the streets. But he's Nkalipho, he sits in the car and mingles with no one. He's there, waiting for me and bored. My mother isn't budging, I thought she'd ask me to let him come in like the other day.

Nzuzo doesn't greet, he walks in and goes straight to his grandmother.

I was waiting for him to come back before I leave.

"Your mother is leaving for the interview," my mother tells him.

He just looks at me and doesn't say anything.

Is he mad at me?

"Baby are you going to take me to the interview with Lume?" I ask.

It would be great if he came with us, Nkalipho will bring him back home. I will be sleeping alone still, without my son in the next room, but that would give me some comfort.

He shakes his head and lifts his foot to my mother's lap. He wants her to take his shoes off. This is the worst day for him to be in such a mood. I need him, I need my son, he's my biggest motivation.

"I will make him noodles, call your boyfriend to come and help you with the bags," – my mother. I think she can tell that I'm going through a lot right now.

I send Nkalipho a text and sit on the couch watching my son giving me a cold shoulder.

"I will see you on Saturday, okay?"

He just nods.

"Are you going to give Gogo a hard time?"

He keeps quiet. I think that's out of question anyway, he will definitely give my mother a hard time and that bothers me the

most because my mother is an old woman who doesn't really understand autism to the dot.

I wanted a good job, not to be separated from my son. Why do I have to choose between the two? My son needs me too; he sees the bags, that's why he's angry.

I hear Nkalipho's voice in the kitchen, he's here.

My mother likes him, she just doesn't want him to get too comfortable.

He walks in, Nzuzo doesn't show any excitement.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"No," I shake my head.

He sits and calls Nzuzo. Luckily, Nzuzo comes and sits on his lap. He's still in his school short and socks. He's not happy at all.

“Are we going to accompany mommy to the interview?” Nkalipho asks him.

He shakes his head. My heart sinks.

“Why not? She has to go there so that she can buy you nice clothes and big toys. You want that, don't you?” – Nkalipho.

He looks at me; my baby is so sad.

“What do you want to be when you're old?” Nkalipho is good with babies. I'd say he learnt it from being a big brother to Sphiwe.

“I want to be a helicopter,” Nzuzo says.

Yeah, it's always been a dream of his. Not the pilot, but the helicopter itself.

“Then your mother has to go to the interview so that you can become a helicopter when you're grown,” Nkalipho says.

He nods and puts his little hands on the sides of Nkalipho's face.

“Why the hair on your face?” he asks.

Nkalipho laughs, “Because I'm old. Come on now big boy, let's help mommy with the bags, when we come back we will buy pizza.”

“He has to eat first babe, his granny is making him noodles,” I say.

“Oh, then let's watch Phineas and Ferb,” he says.

It's so weird that it looks like he enjoys watching cartoons now. I don't want to have a man who likes watching cartoons.

My mother walks in with Nzuzo's bowl.

"Feed him, you're about to leave," she says dumping it in front of me.

She's right, I have to feed my baby one last time.

"Wena Nkalipho I will take you to my church because you keep failing to drag this one with you to your own church," my mother says.

Nkalipho chuckles, "Soon we will go, it's just that things kept coming up."

"No, not things, Satan keep coming up," - that's my mother.

Honestly I'm no longer interested in going to church with Nkalipho. I will pray in my room and ask God for guidance and protection.

We are interrupted by someone crying at the door. It sounds like Mam' Busi. I'm panicking right away. She makes her way in, tears covering her face.

"MaKhumalo is everything alright?" my mother asks. We are both on our feet.

Despite of everything that happened we are still family.

"I have waited the whole day, Njomane is not coming back home. He ran to the river last night saying Smangele is there calling him," she says. She's stopped crying, now she's looking at Nkalipho.

“Was he dreaming?” my mother asks.

“Yeah, I tried to stop him but he didn’t listen. I think he drowned, I want to call the police but I’m not sure if the time is right yet,” she says.

Babo and I haven’t been on the best of terms, but I don’t want him to die, there’s a lot that he still needs to fix.

“Did you look for him?” I ask.

“No, I waited,” she says.

He’s her husband for crying out loud. How can she just wait and not go look for him? And why is she wearing all-black already?

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 40

NONDUMEZULU

The police arrived in the blink of an eye after I made a call. They're here to listen to the story, at this point I don't think they can be able to help. Mam Busi says Babo drowned in the river but she didn't see him going there. All he said apparently was that Smangele must hold on. Nothing about going and jumping into the river.

I can see the police are not believing her, just like all the neighbors.

“Mam are you sure your husband wasn’t drunk?” one asks, with a mocking smile.

“Njomane doesn’t drink,” Mam Busi says patiently. She’s no longer crying, she only did when the police arrived and stopped shortly afterwards.

“You’re sure he wasn’t pulling an act to go and do things behind your back?”

Now this is the question I cannot get past as well. We heard that Aunt Teekay left the Magagula house and now Babo has disappeared. It’s too coincidental if you ask me.

“My husband was an honest man, he didn’t do anything behind my back,” she’s talking like he’s been declared dead.

There are low whispers from the neighbors. Everyone knows that Babo was cheating on her, she shouldn't be embarrassed about to admit it.

“Did you have a fight perhaps?” – the police officer asks.

“No, we had nice dinner and even played the adult game before sleeping.” Too much information! I can't imagine them having sex.

Finally Salo is here. I don't who's driving her, probably one of the Manzini connected people. I can tell from a distance that she comes with no peace.

“Where's my father?” she throws the question to the crowd.

Mam' Busi is crying again. If I didn't know how human nature works I'd say she cries with battery, she pauses to save energy and starts crying only when it's necessary.

My mother is the one who explains what happened.

"No, that didn't happen," Salo says.

Everyone is shocked. We are all here trying to figure out what really happened, including her mother and the police and she's just calling it all nonsense.

"Ma, where's my father?" She's glaring at her mother.

The crying have stopped.

"Your aunt called him to the river," – Mam Busi.

“Did you stop him? Did you lock the doors or run after him?”

“Wasn’t I asleep? Huh?” Now Mam Busi is getting angry.

“No Ma, I know that’s not what happened to him. Tell people the truth, what did you do to my father?” She’s out of control, crying and trying to fight her way to get mother.

Issa movie!

I think now everyone is curious and starting to look at Mam Busi differently.

Which is why she’s crying and begging the police to intervene.

“This child hasn’t been talking to me and her father. She can’t come here and accuse me of things. Me? I haven’t eaten since

morning, I'm praying for her father's body to be found," she says.

She's so weird. Maybe not weird, guilty as Salo suspects. Would she really kill her husband?

"But why are you so sure Babo is dead?" I ask her.

The look she gives me! I should've kept quiet.

"Have you ever seen him disappearing for this long?"

"No," I lie. Babo definitely does disappear on her for days, if my sexy aunt is in town.

"Exactly! Nkndumezulu works at Shoprite as a cashier, she's my witness," she says.

I'm definitely not anyone's witness, I don't know what's going on, I didn't see anything, I don't know anything.

The police promise to send a team of divers to the river and ask that we keep them updated if anything new comes up. I don't think Mam Busi has a solid case, they don't believe anything happened to him, especially not drowning since nobody saw him going to the river.

The neighbors leave, now it's just us, the family. Salo's driver is in the car, we have walked inside the house, she's still demanding answers from her mother. I didn't know this family was this divided until now. I can't believe how she's talking

to her mother. The mother of the year isn't her children's favourite apparently.

"Mamdala I will come and sleep with you today," Salo says to my mother.

My eyes widen. Is it that bad? I'm talking about their relationship.

"You're welcome anytime, plus Nondu is leaving today," my mother says.

"Leaving to where?" – Mam Busi.

"To try and secure a job, I wasn't called to the river." It's probably too soon, I'm being insensitive with this joke

"Speaking of which, I have to go to Nkalipho, he's alone with Nzuzo in the house. I hope Babo comes home soon, I know he's alive wherever he is," I say.

Salo is crying on the couch, I give her a hug before I leave.

We have been delayed. It's a must that I leave today, this is my one chance of proving myself to Dr Manzini and to the world, I deserve the job and I'm a very determined individual.

Nkalipho and Nzuzo seem to be fine.

"Are they finding him?" he asks.

"Nope. Aunt Teekay is also unavailable, I think they're together wherever they are. I just feel bad for Mam Busi because she already thinks he's dead and she sees herself as the chief widow of this township," I say.

He laughs, “She’s full of drama, probably why he left.”

I sit and lower my head next to him.

“Salo thinks she did something to him.”

Now I’m gossiping.

“Well, it’s a possibility,” he says.

“I know but...he’s her husband for goodness’ sake.”

He chokes down a laugh, “And you think that makes him special? Come on babe, let’s not be delusional. Are we waiting for your mother or leaving?”

“Leaving, she’s probably going to be at their house the whole day.”

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Nkalipho actually bought the whole furniture for the house. I have a queen bed and one single in what's going to be Nzuzo's room. Then the whole kitchen set and lounge items. I still have a lot of details to add to the house to give it a homely feel. But I love it regardless, Nzuzo loves it too. He's is playing games on the tablet. They're about to leave, I'm sad and scared. I don't know anyone in the neighborhood and this is going to be my first night here, sleeping alone. I wish Nkalipho can take Nzuzo home and come back, but that would be selfish of me because he's been talking about how busy things are at work.

He puts his arm around my shoulder and nudges me with his knee.

“It’s been a long time,” he says in a low whisper.

I frown and shift my eyes to him.

“How?” I ask.

“I miss you,” he’s staring at my lips.

He means it’s been long since we last spent some quality time together. I know, even when we are together distractions always pop up.

“You will visit during the weekend, right?” I ask.

“Yeah, but that’s far. Don’t you need a bathroom?”

Weird question.

“No, I don’t,” I say.

He exhales heavily and glances at Nzuzo.

“I have to pee,” he says, standing up and heading to the bathroom.

He’s acting weird. I lie back on my lounge-seater and watch Nzuzo. His whole attention is on the game, I must buy him his own tablet when I start earning good money, it’s going to help his brain activity.

“Can I have a turn?” I ask.

Silence....

“Nzu?” I raise my voice.

He looks up, I’m just disturbing him.

“No mommy,” he says before turning his eyes back to his fingers.

At least we are good now. I laugh, I'm going to miss him so much. This is one person who can make me laugh my ass out and scream my head off all in less than 5 minutes.

"Nondu," the voice comes from the bathroom.

What's up with him now?

He calls again, "Babe please bring me toilet paper."

"Okay, I'm coming," I say.

I left everything on the kitchen counter. I fetch one roll and go to the bathroom to give him. I pull the door slightly, enough for my hand to slide in with the toilet roll.

"Babe, here it is," I say.

Instead of taking the toilet paper he's grabbing my whole arm.

He pulls me in and peeks out at Nzuzo and then closes the door gently behind us.

"And then?" I'm confused.

"I will be fast babe, just two minutes, my dick is throbbing."

I'm out of words. He didn't need the toilet paper, he wants to have sex with me in the bathroom while my son is in the lounge, wide awake.

"Come on, we can't be that reckless, there's time and place for everything."

"Please sthandwa sami, just one for the road." He pushes me against the wall next to the door and grabs my boobs. He's

playing with them while staring at me,
waiting for me to say yes.

“Come back tomorrow after work,” I say.

“I will, but I still need some even today.

Ngiyacela, Nzuzo is playing a game and not paying any attention.” He slides his hand into the front of my panties and brushes my mound.

I’m not sure I want to do it, however I’m not stopping his hand as he starts fingering me.

“Nondu,” he breathes heavily over my shoulder.

“Nkalipho,” I say and swallow hard.

My body is ready, he’s stimulating my clit, but my mind is still not there.

“It’s only you who takes care of my sexual needs. I don’t get this anywhere else. All I ask for is a quickie before I leave, I’m not going to take long, please,” he begs.

His voice softens me up. He’s horny and desperate.

I kiss his lips, that gives him consent to drag my panties down to my ankles and lifts one leg to the wall before positioning him between my thighs.

“Condom,” I say.

“I will pull out, I don’t have any condoms with me, they’re in the car.”

“Come on Nkalipho, I still don’t know if I caught anything the last time we had sex. I can’t keep taking such risks,” I say.

“Nothing is going to happen, I will make sure nothing leaks inside you.” He trails kisses down my neck and rubs my clit with the raw head of his dick. There’s pre-cum leaking, that’s for sure. But I let him in, as worried and uncomfortable as I am.

“Yashisa kanje baby, uyiphekile yini?” He’s pounding inside me with minimum patience.

Our eyes lock, his facial expressions are hilarious. I can take him for two more minutes; he’s in his little heaven. If there’s anything I’ve come to know is that Nkalipho is rough. I don’t think during sex he remembers that I don’t use my vagina only for fucking, but peeing as well. I don’t

want to complain today, I want him to have it and finish as soon as possible.

“Sthandwa sami...baby...baby?” He’s groaning as he rips my vagina apart. I can feel my walls stretching as he hits from side to side, and into my deepest corners.

“Mmmmm!” I moan with my eyes tightly shut.

“You’re my future Ndume!” He grabs my neck and shuts my low moans with a kiss while thrusting into the depths of my core with no mercy. His grip tightens, he’s not strangling me but there’s an effect of his grip.

Our lips are locked together, he groans on my mouth and quickly pulls out.

He breaks the kiss and grabs my boob while stroking himself with one hand.

It doesn't take long for him to reach his orgasm.

“Yoooh baby, aweee!” He's panting, leaking every drop on the floor.

I push him out of the way and pick the toilet paper from the floor. I wipe myself and wash my hands in the sink. My vagina is on fire but I try my best to ignore the pain and walk properly.

“Ndume,” he grabs my arm as I head to the door.

I look at him, plainly. I cannot be mad at him because I let him do it.

“I have to check on Nzuzo,” I say.

“Okay, but are you okay?” he asks.

I nod, “Yeah, I’m good.”

“I will come tomorrow after work, then we can finish and do things properly. Thank you for today, I had missed you so much.”

He wraps his arms around me and locks his lips into mine, we kiss for a minute then I leave him getting cleaned.

I never thought I’d ever be in a position where I have a good boyfriend who’s bad at sex. If he’s not aggressive, he’s not lasting, it’s a disaster.

Nzuzo is still playing his game, has no care of what’s happening in the ‘bathroom’ world.

I sit and open my Whatsapp. I have two messages from Salo; they’re not finding

Babo anywhere. This is not good for her, she's pregnant, this will drive her straight to depression. I don't understand why Babo is not coming home. Mam Busi believes that he's dead, if he doesn't show up soon she will start with the funeral arrangements. You know Africans, if they don't find your body they bury your clothes.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 41

SALO MHLONGO

A team of local uncles which was led by Bab' Shange came back empty-handedly. It was my job to buy them drinks after they spent almost the whole afternoon searching for nothing at the river. There's no evidence showing that my father went to the river and drowned there. I still have hope that he went somewhere to get fresh air. I know they supposedly squashed it during family dinner, however knowing my mother the way I do she probably started some bullshit again.

I didn't think I'd be home today, or anytime soon. I'm scared of what my mother might do to my baby. Zothani is also not happy that I'm here, but he understood the

importance of it. I haven't told my brother and sister yet, I don't want them to panic. I, will tell them once there's something solid to tell.

She walks out of her bedroom with a blanket over her shoulders. My mother has always been a drama queen but today she's like a mad woman. She's blowing things out of proportion, forcing people to agree that she's a widow and, crying on and off. Right now I don't know why she's pulling the table and TV stand.

"Move," she says to me.

"Why?" I'm drinking the bottle of water I came with. I'm probably being dramatic as well but there's no way I'm going to eat her

food and drink her water. I'm not even going to sleep here, I will sleep at Nondu's house. She created this tension between us, I cannot trust her.

"I have to light candles, we are under a dark cloud," she says.

I need to breathe and calm down. No screaming, I don't want to raise my blood pressure, I have a baby in my womb.

"My father is not dead," I say.

"Okay he's not dead. Where is he then?"

She throws her hands up and looks around then back at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Maybe he's with his girlfriends." I shouldn't have said that.

She's glaring at me, with her hands on the waist. "Take me to those girlfriends. You know them, right?"

"I'm just guessing Ma, it's not a secret that he is not just yours, he's got a wandering eye."

She sighs heavily and comes next to me and sits. I'm a bit uncomfortable but I can see she's not up to any evil.

"Your father was really ungrateful. Do you know how many things I've put up with in this marriage, for years?" She's a heart-broken woman. I do have sympathy, I feel sorry for her because no woman deserves to feel like she's not enough for her man.

"I know and I respect and love you. But nawe Ma, you cannot control everybody's

lives. My teacher used to say men are like sand, if you squeeze too tight they will trickle through your fingers,” I say.

A moment of silence passes, then she chuckles and turns her eyes to me.

“Who’s this grown woman? Where is my little girl?” she asks.

I laugh. Yeah, she’s still my mother, she carried me for nine months, I can’t just cut her off completely.

“I’m grown, accept that,” I say.

My phone rings.

It’s Zothani, he said he was going to come and check up on me.

“Please take off the blanket, dad is still alive,” I say.

“Fine, but if the week ends and he’s not here, I will go to the police and ask for permission to make a funeral for him. Just so his soul can rest in peace. Do you think the insurance company is going to pay?”

Wow, just when I thought we were getting on the same page.

“He’s my dad and you only care about whether the insurance company will pay or not? Now you’re making me think you did something to him again.”

“As tall and big as he was, yet intuthwane ewuBusisekile could’ve chopped him and eaten him?” she asks.

My mistake, in fact my stupidity, I was wrong, this woman is still the devil my

father told me she was. All she's thinking about is money. Really?

I go to the kitchen and answer the call.

Zothani has pulled up outside, he wants to see me. I needed to get out and have some fresh air. My mother is going to drive me crazy.

“No candles Ma please, don't invite bad lucks on us,” I say pulling my push-ons and putting them on.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

I want to lie but she will probably see the car outside.

“Zothani is here to check up on me,” I say.

“Zothani, okay. What car is he driving?”

“CX-5, why are you asking?”

She’s squinting her eyes, probably trying to think which type is that.

“Is it expensive than that boy’s car?”

“What boy?” I’m confused.

“The one who’s busy with Nondu.”

“I don’t know Ma, I don’t sit and compare people’s cars.”

She pays no regard to that, for some reason she looks excited. She throws the blanket on the couch and fixes her scarf.

“I have to come and greet,” she says.

“What? No Ma, he’s in a hurry, you’re going to delay him.” That’s not the only reason I don’t want her to come, she hates

Zothani for Christ' sake, why does she need to go and greet him now.

“I will just say hello,” she’s ecstatic.

Phewww! I can’t force her to sit, she’s walking with her own legs.

“Please don’t say bad things to him Ma,” I beg as we walk out of the kitchen door.

“No baby, don’t worry. I have changed my mind, I can look after the baby now that I’m free, I want you to be a slaying babymama. Plus your boyfriend is going to be supportive, he didn’t deny the pregnancy. It’s going to work out perfectly, there will be no grandchild like mine here,” she’s boasting while opening the gate.

I’m not competing with anyone by being pregnant. I’m not trying to outshine

anyone, Zothani is supportive and present, I can only thank God for that because men run away from their babies these days. It's not something you can mock someone about, being a struggling single mother is hard.

“Is that his car?” she asks.

Zothani is parked on the other side of the road.

“Yeah,” I say holding a silent prayer with my heart.

I know how Zothani feels about my mother.

“Tell him to come and park the car in front of the gate, idunuse ibuke phesheya.” She wants him to park in front of our gate. It's not her welcoming him, she only wants to show off.

“He’s okay there,” I say.

**“But people won’t see that he’s our guest,
he’s parked in an unclear spot.”**

**I have to look at her, she’s dead serious,
wow .**

**“Let me ask MaNkosi to bring me teabags,”
she takes the phone out of her bra and
shoots me a glance. “Why are you
standing? Go and tell him to come and park
here.”**

**Before I can comment, she’s on the call
with MaNkosi asking her to bring teabags
while she has two full packs in the house.
I’m embarrassed.**

**Zothani is confused and scared. I tell him
it’s okay, he comes and parks in front of**

our gate. My mother is standing behind the gate with a smile on her face.

I step closer to the car after he's parked. I want him to be comfortable as he meets my unpredictable mother.

"There is MaNkosi coming, hoot," she says.

Zothani frowns; he's confused.

I gently pull his hand. Why do we need to hoot for MaNkosi?

"Sawubona Ma," he greets humbly.

"Your car is the most beautiful car that has ever parked on these streets. You look smart too, Salabenzi has my taste," she says laughing.

I don't know about us having the same taste, hey. She offers him a handshake, I

can tell he's shitting in his pants and holding a big prayer by heart.

"Let's go inside," she says.

I hold Zothani's hand, we follow behind her. She's complimenting him nonstop. His car just changed her whole perspective about us. That's so weird and uncomfortable.

"Do you drink juice mkhwenyana?" she asks.

I reply first, "No, he doesn't drink juice, only water."

He has a bottle of water in his hand, there's no way she's going to serve him more water.

“I know I was worried when I first heard that she’s pregnant.” Worried? Just worried? Okay.

She sits and looks at us smiling.

“You two are birds of the same feather. You were made for one another,” she says and giggles.

“Ma!” I give her a look- stop acting weird.

“When is the baby shower? You need to lift the bar high, nenze isphihli somcimbi.”

Okay, something is wrong with my mother mentally. Both her and my father have had a drastic change of character. I can’t say they’re getting old because there are many people their age who still act sane.

Zothani clears his throat, “Thanks for the suggestion. Is there any update regarding Bab’ Njomane?”

“Her father?” She’s pointing at me with her thumb.

“Your husband too Ma,” I snap.

“Well, she’s in denial, she wants us to wait until the end of the week before starting with the funeral arrangements,” she tells Zothani.

Luckily MaNkosi walks in with Nzuzo behind her. Immediately Zothani’s face lights up, they recognize one another.

Nzuzo is not predictable, he can like you and then dislike you for no reason, but he’s excited to see Zothani. He even comes and sits on his lap.

“Oh MaNkosi you must be wondering who this is. This is Salabenzi’s boyfriend, the father of the child who wanted to come and pay for the damages before the baby is even born,” – that’s my mother.

Can the floor open up and swallow me?

“Nice to meet you ndodana,” MaNkosi is always calm and collected.

She smiles and asks my mother to the side without raising any suspicions. She wants to give her the teabags without embarrassing her to her future son-in-law. But no, you don’t do favors for Busisekile Khumalo, she will flip the script on you.

“Thanks for the teabags, I will bring them back in the morning, phela I don’t want to

trouble Nondumezulu, I know there isn't a lot from where you take," she says.

MaNkosi brushes it off with a smile and tells her not to worry. I'm close to blowing up. How does she do it? Mocking, competing and hating on everyone?

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NONDUMEZULU

I had my session today, it lasted about 30 minutes. We were just talking, I was telling Dr Khan about myself and trying to make her understand why I am the way I am. It honestly doesn't feel like therapy, it's just

two people talking, that's why I'm looking forward to another session.

I'm in the house, I decided to bring KFC, I won't cook. Nkalipho is on his way here, I'm looking forward to hosting him in my house. I wish Nzuzo could've come as well, but he's fine, I talked to him after he got out of school.

My phone rings.

It's Nkalipho, my heart dances nay-nay.

I run to the mirror, look at my face and check if my ass is still big. Then I rush to the gate to open for him. He's surprisingly not driving.

"Where is the car?" I ask.

“Yebo sthandwa sami, I’m fine, what about you?”

I roll my eyes and lock the gate.

He pulls my hand and plants soft kisses on my cheek.

“I missed you,” he says.

“I missed you too. Is my ass still big?” I turn around so that he can have a good look. I’ve been sitting down a lot today, maybe it got flat.

“It’s been big before?” He’s full of shit.

“You’re not going to get my KFC.”

He bursts into laughter. For this I’m going to spank him in public.

Of course I was just joking, I dish up for us as soon as he sits. He came straight from

work to here, he's hungry. They say a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, I'm just trying to secure my spot.

"I thought you'd cook," he says.

"Sorry boo, eat your chicken." I mean the first benefit of staying alone is that you don't cook. I've been eating junk food and drinking fizzy drinks since yesterday. I'm enjoying my freedom.

I take plates to the kitchen after eating. He goes to the bathroom and takes a shower. I search for a movie we are going to watch, I have Netflix, I'm living a soft life.

He comes back wearing a short, he's topless as usual. Maybe he was a model in his previous life. He slides in next to me on

the couch and wraps his arms around me. I lean back to his chest and allow him to cuddle me.

“So they’re going to come and pick you up in the morning as well?”

“Yeah, I pay for petrol,” he says and trails a couple of kisses down my neck. “I can live like this, coming home to you everyday.”

I smile, he’s sweet.

“I wasn’t just saying it because of pussy yesterday. You are my future Nondu. Have you ever thought of us becoming a family?”

“I thought we were taking things slow,” I say playfully pinching his knee. Serious talk during the movie?

“That doesn’t mean we can’t have dreams together.” Well, he’s got a point.

“I already see us as a family,” I say.

He just chuckles. I can tell he’s not satisfied with my answer.

He doesn’t take it any further, we watch the movie in peace.

Before going to bed I go to the kitchen and drink a glass of Coke. I haven’t had a fridge full of everything I want in a long time, I’m snacking and drinking every chance I get.

When I walk in burping, he’s staring at me laughing.

“What’s funny?” I ask.

“You’re making me nervous. We have to take a pregnancy test to know where we stand.”

“Drinking Coke is not a pregnancy symptom, but fine, we will do it tomorrow. Fingers crossed, I’m not pregnant because if I am I will never speak to you again.”

He doesn’t say anything. I really hope God didn’t ‘trust me with another soul’, I’m still struggling with the last soul he trusted me with.

“Today I brought the condoms,” he says taking them out of his short.

A deep breath Nondu!

I lie in his arms and say nothing.

He kisses me, “I missed you so much. What did you feed me? I’m getting crazier about you everyday.”

“Korobela,” I say.

He laughs, “Don’t stop, I love loving you, I feel like I have a purpose to wake up everyday in the morning. I don’t want to say much because you freak out, but I have a lot of plans for you and me and Nzuzo.”

I still don’t understand why I didn’t meet him when I was 16.

“I hate you for coming to my life this late,” I say.

“It’s not late, there’s a lot that we still need to do. Buying a house, getting married, making babies and chasing our dreams together.” He’s right, he may not be Nzuzo’s father by blood but he’s here when it fits the most for him to be.

“I love you Nkalipho,” I tell him.

He smiles, “Not as much as I love you.”

I peck his lips and play with his beard. He's letting it grow, I love it.

"I was getting horny at work thinking about you," he says.

Here we go...

"Really?" I say.

He drops his hands to my waist and starts touching my ass that he said has never been big. I woke today still sore from his dick, I can't be doing it everyday.

"You're sexy," he's breathing next to my neck.

It's turning me on, but I know there's a bigger issue.

"Can I say something?"

“Yeah,” he brushes his lips against my neck while listening.

“I don’t enjoy sex with you Nkalipho,” I say.

He lifts his face from my neck. I really hope he doesn’t take this badly.

“Ngiyakuthanda,” I say.

His look is...I’m nervous, he’s hurt.

“What do you mean?” His voice sounds different.

“Like I don’t get much pleasure, ever since we started dating. Maybe it was just one time only,” I tell him.

A moment of silence passes.

Then he says, “Okay.”

I don't know what to say from here, he's just closed the topic.

I stay quiet too. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up, it wasn't the right time.

He releases a deep sigh and pushes me aside, keeping some distance between us.

“You can't be offended Nkalipho, you asked me to be open with you and here I am telling you how I feel and you're just shutting me off.”

“Open with me Nondu? How long have we been together? How many times have we had sex? All along I'm thinking you're sexually attracted to me whereas you're not feeling me at all. How is that being honest?”

“I didn’t say I’m not sexually attracted to you and this is not the first time I’m addressing this with you.” I hate it when someone twists my words.

“Don’t fuck with me. You said you didn’t like my pace and suggested that we try oral. Not even once did you tell me you don’t enjoy having sex with me. Like what does that even mean? Is there something wrong with me, maybe that puts you off?”

I’m not doing this shit right now. Nope, I want to have a peaceful night.

“You can face the other way but you know that you are hurting me by saying what you said. I’ve been thinking you’re shy or still getting used to me that’s why you never try to get intimate with me out of your own

will. I didn't know it's because you don't like having sex with me," he says.

I stay calm, just staring at the wall in front of me.

"Baby yini?" His voice trembles.

I turn around, my heart is beating fast.

He has tears in his eyes.

"I know maybe the things you've discovered along our journey kind of put you off. I want to understand. Is it what you said before or something else? Do I disgust you?"

I'm out of words. I don't know what to say.

This has nothing to do with his past, I don't even think about it. I'm hurt that he even think I'd be disgusted by him.

“Nkalipho, seriously!”

His face is in his hands.

My heart is shattering into pieces.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize. I think at this point it’s what I need to do, I shouldn’t have brought it up that way maybe, I don’t know.

“I just want to go home,” he says, sliding out of the bed.

I cannot see his face. This is the most horrible evening of my life.

He’s leaving.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 42

NONDUMEZULU

It could've been a great night, I'm taking full responsibility for what happened. I don't know how he got home, he probably called someone to come and pick him up. I checked a few minutes after he walked out and he was not at the gate. I will call him when the sun is up, we have to talk about what happened. I already apologized but if he needs me to do it again, I will.

My session with Dr Khan is at 12:45pm, I will be on the couch all morning with my broken heart daydreaming about a perfect

relationship that we could have, only if we stop fighting so constantly.

I have a can of Dragon energy drink, I drink it and start cleaning my bedroom. I have no appetite for breakfast. I only have one dustbin, it's by the kitchen door, as I open it to throw in dirt the door handle moves. The gate is locked, could there be any ghosts haunting this house?

My eyes are bugging out, I don't know whether to grab the kitchen knife or hide.

Then it opens, Nkalipho walks in, still wearing the same clothes he left in.

"Nkalipho?" I'm surprised and confused at the same time.

He stands by the counter, rubbing the sides of his arms.

His eyes are red-rimmed, he looks exhausted.

“Where are you coming from?” I ask.

Instead of giving me an answer he asks for a bath.

I don't stand on his way, I tell him I will make him a cup of tea.

He goes to the bathroom, I'm left asking myself how he's here so early in the morning. I open all doors and windows, something tells me to get some fresh air.

I'm just stretching my legs while waiting for him to finish taking a bath. I wanted to talk but I wasn't prepared yet, I thought it would be via the phone and not so early in the morning.

Behind the house, just outside my bedroom window, there's a jacket. His jacket, on the ground. I feel what I always feel after clashing with Nzuzo and putting my hands on him. Like a horrible human being to ever live. So he slept outside because of what I said, without even a bad intention. How can he do this to me? How does he expect me to feel when he treats me exactly like his mother?

I walk back inside the house, I'm shaking, my eyes are burning with tears.

He's in bed with the duvet pulled over his head.

"Nkalipho," I stand next to the bed.

He pulls off the duvet, you can tell he's cold and just wants a quick nap.

“Did you sleep outside?” I ask.

“I just want to take a nap. Can I?”

Fuckin’ hell, no!

“What kind of a person are you? How can you do something like that? Playing with my emotions and making me feel like I’m the devil. If you didn’t want to be in the same room as me you could’ve just used the other room or slept on the couch. What is wrong with you?” I’m screaming my head off and he’s just looking at me. Now he’s lying here looking like an abused orphan.

“So you’re going to tell your family that I’m abusing you, just like your mother?”

Clearly he wants to be a victim for the rest of his life.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

I’m not accepting an apology, I need an explanation.

“Why Nkalipho?” I ask.

“I don’t know, I’m sorry,” he says.

I sit on the bed, I’m defeated. There was absolute no reason for him to sleep in the cold outside, he just wanted to hurt me. I can’t believe he stooped that low.

“Fine, we can go on with things the way they were, pretend like I didn’t say anything at all. I wouldn’t want you to sleep outside of the house you are paying rent for. Forget I said anything. Are you going to drink the tea?”

“Please don’t mention things I do for you out of love as a fighting weapon,” he says.

That's rich coming from him!

“Says someone who sleeps outside over a little disagreement? Are you going to drink your tea, yes or no?” I ask.

He sighs heavily, “Yes, one spoon of sugar.”

I go to the kitchen and boil water. At times like this I wish I had friends, people to talk to about these type of things. In as much as Salo and I talk frequently now, I cannot be buzzing her phone with my relationship problems so early in the morning, she's dealing with the disappearance of her father.

I make two cups of tea and cheese sandwiches. We are going to pretend like

his sex is great, I will never mention his aggression, lest he freezes himself to death.

He sits up when I walk in, expecting his abuser to serve him.

We eat in silence. I love Nkalipho, I don't want to be with anyone but him, but now I'm not sure if we are good for each other.

I'm not an emotional strong individual, that's why I wasn't hired immediately and referred to a therapist, I don't need him to play on those emotions. These constant fights are killing me, love should be fun. I don't understand how he can love me so much, yet can't get along with me.

“Are you crying?” His finger is wiping something on my cheek.

I yank it off and look away. He wanted to hurt me and he did, so he must stop pretending like he cares that I have tears in my eyes.

“Can we talk about it?”

Now he wants to talk.

“When I wanted to talk you didn’t want to. As I asked, let’s forget about it and move on.”

“I’m sorry Nondu, I was triggered, hence my reaction. I want us to talk about it again. Just tell me what you want me to do,” he says.

“I don’t want you to do anything,” I say and sip my tea.

We could’ve had this conversation yesterday, smoothly.

“So what do you want us to do? You want to have a sexual partner that’s not me?”

I turn and look at him with my eyebrows snapped together. Really now?

“Don’t ask me nonsense Nkalipho,” I say.

“Talk to me. What is it that you want if you hate having sex with me and doesn’t want me to do anything to make the situation better?”

“I told you what I’d like us to do a long time ago,” I say.

“Oral?” he asks.

“Touching me and making love to me.

That’s what I asked for, not to be fucked like a machine whore.” That wasn’t a good choice of words but he feels insulted by anything I say anyway.

“Did I hurt you the last time?” he asks.

I release a deep breath and finish my tea before attending the conversation. Yes, things are discussed on Nkalipho’s time here. It’s his way or highway.

He’s looking at me with the patience I badly needed yesterday.

“You hurt me everytime you get inside me,” I say.

For a change there’s sympathy in his eyes, not rage.

“Why not tell me immediately?” he asks.

“One of us has to get an orgasm, luckily for you the favor is always on your side.”

“It’s not favor, your cookie is too hot to handle,” he says, stretching a thin smile.

His compliment is not going to help me. I'm not finding humor in it either.

He clears his throat, "I'm willing to learn. I've had my own struggles with sex, I only started doing it officially when I was 21. I don't hurt you on purpose, at times my mind would want me to finish and then I'd lose control over my body. But I do enjoy having sex with you, thoroughly. Every time I see you I just want you all to myself."

This is what I wanted to hear yesterday. I put my empty cup away and start eating my sandwich. Yes, tea first then bread.

"Not enjoying sex doesn't mean I'm not attracted to you. Why would I be with you

if I wasn't attracted to you?" I ask, shifting back to sit closer to him.

"I don't know, you hardly ever initiate something with me or touch my body the way you want me to touch yours," he says.

"I can work on that. Anything to make our relationship better, I hate fighting with you. I don't understand why our relationship isn't always fun. It's mentally exhausting, I just want us to be happy," I say.

"Thank you sthandwa sami, I will make an effort as well. I love you, uyezwa?"

I smile, "I love you too. Also, please stop cooking two minutes noodles. I'm a woman, I take longer to cum and I need a hard penis to take me there."

“You open too wide, my blood rushes,” he says.

I open too wide? My eyes are about to pop out.

He bursts into laughter.

“I’m kidding, I will try not to. Come here, I want to see you.” He puts his cup away and pulls me closer. We are now okay, I wrap my arm around his shoulder and initiate a kiss.

I have to randomly give him blowjobs and ask for sex, that’s what he’s asking for and unlike him, I don’t feel insulted.

“We are going to see the doctor after your session, right?”

I want to scream everytime I think about that.

“I don’t want to have a baby,” I tell him.

“I know, I don’t want your mother to hate me either. But if you are pregnant, what are you going to do?” He’s indirectly asking me if I will consider aborting.

“I will abort,” I say.

I said that to test his reaction, if I believed in abortion I would’ve done it with Nzuzo, when I was 16 and alone.

“Because of work?” He’s calm.

Very unexpected, I thought he’d manipulate my emotions as usual.

I nod, “Yes.”

“Even if the timing isn’t right, I would love to have a baby with you. I can even take

the baby and look after when you're at work," he says.

I've seen him with Nzuzo, I know he'd be a great dad.

"I'm kidding babe, I wouldn't abort but I'd hate you," I say.

He smiles, "For how long? You know I can't live without you. I'd rather die than to be without you."

That's not a good statement, knowing who he really is and that he's attempted suicide before. But I smile back and peck his lips.

His phone rings, I let him go and give him space to answer.

I take cups back to the kitchen. I'm happy we are alright, I could've messed my

session and furtherly killed my chances of getting hired by Dr Manzini.

He's still on the phone when I walk back into the bedroom.

He signals for me to come and lie in his arms.

"She's here," he tells the person on the phone and kisses my cheek.

I'm looking at him curiously. I haven't met any of his friends or cousins.

I'd love to know them, they might have some inside info for me about which ex to look out for.

He puts the phone on my ear.

"Who is it?" I ask him in a low whisper.

"MaNjomane," – that's his father.

My eyes widen.

“Hello,” I don’t know what to call him.

“I beg of you ndodakazi, when you’re done with my son please borrow me him, he’s got work to do,” he says.

I’m engulfed in shame even though I didn’t ask him to be here.

“Yes baba, I hear you,” I say.

“Thank you my child. Are you two friends now? The last time I checked you weren’t, he was just a boy you know.” There’s so much mockery in his question.

“We are friends now,” I say.

Nkalipho raises his eyebrow. I give him a scowl, he mustn’t be childish, he knows that we are dating.

“We are friends?” he asks regardless of my reprimanding look.

His father laughs on the phone.

“Don’t let him force things, if he’s a friend then he’s just a friend,” he says. I think he enjoys teasing Nkalipho and this one takes things too seriously.

He takes the phone from me and tells his father he will call him back and ends the call.

He puts it away and then confronts me with a stare.

“Hello friend,” he says.

I crack up and laugh. He’s such a baby.

He rolls over me and stares down at me.

“You’re cheeky, you need to be laid down with a hard pipe.”

I still have enough time, I can take the pipe if it’s going to be good

“Babe please be...” He doesn’t let me finish.

He cuts me short, “Slow, touchy and not nutting too fast.”

Music to my ears! Our lips lock into an intimate kiss. We are getting naked and making love, not fucking this time around, I hope he understands the assignment.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 43

SALO MHLONGO

My father still hasn't come, neither dead nor alive. I still believe he's alive, I should be back at work but I have to stay home and make sure my mother doesn't throw a surprise funeral. Today I have an appointment with my gynecologist, Zothani is fetching me.

I still sleep with MaNkosi and Nzuzo, my mother doesn't seem to care that much. I came in the morning and made breakfast for both of us. I think now it's starting to

stress her that my father can't be found anywhere.

She's sitting in the lounge as I get ready to go. My stomach is growing faster than I expected. I can't fit in most of my dresses, Zothani needs to go and shop for me some new clothes. I have no energy to comb, I wear my curly wig and do little touch-ups on my face.

"Salabenzi," my mom yells.

I'm still a child, I stop everything and go to her.

She's now watching TV, the volume is kept soft.

When I walk in she looks up, "Sit down."

Okay, this is interesting.

“Is everything alright?” I ask.

“Your father is not dead,” she says.

At least now she’s thinking positively.

“He’s going to come back,” I say, full of hope.

“How come? I don’t understand,” she’s shaking her head. Now it’s me who doesn’t understand what she means. Wasn’t he supposed to come back?

She shifts her eyes from the TV screen to me. “They should’ve found his body by now. Do you think maybe he was swallowed by a crocodile?”

Did I say she’s thinking positively? No, scratch that.

“No Ma, he’s damn alive,” I snap at her.

Sometimes she just says things that make me lose respect for her.

“That would be a narrow escape,” she says.

I don’t think she’s fully conscious and aware of who she’s talking to.

“What do you mean? Were you trying to kill my father?” I’ve had these suspicions but I ended up thinking maybe I was delusional.

She’s quiet.

“Answer me MaKhumalo, did you kill my dad?”

She sighs heavily, “I can’t believe your father would do that to me.”

“Do what? Not die when you’re trying to kill him? Mama are you listening to yourself?”

“It’s what good for this family,” she says.

My heart is palpitating, I could be the one dying from heart failure and not my father who was bewitched.

“What did you do?” I ask.

“I protected the family. You, your siblings, myself and even him. He was making a lot of mistakes, trust me it was coming from a good place.” She’s dead serious. She was trying to kill my dad and maybe she did, yet she still insists that it was for a good cause.

“Okay, I have to go to the doctor, later we need to have a family meeting with

MaNkosi, I will put Nondu, Sekhona and Sbonga on conference,” I say.

“A meeting for what?” she asks.

“We need to find a way forward, MaNkosi is the eldest in this family, she will advise us. We can’t just fold arms not knowing what happened.” What I really want to say is that she needs to get exposed; everyone must know what she’s capable of. Also, I think it’s time to consult a traditional seer, someone who will see exactly what this woman did and how it ended. I won’t lie I’m scared for my life and my siblings’ lives. If she can kill her husband whom she known before us, then who are we?

By the time Zothani calls me saying he’s parked down the road, I’ve been praying to

leave the house as soon as possible. She's now watching TV, I ask if she needs anything from the shops- fawning for my life to be spared.

“Tell umkwenyana to buy me Coke,” she says.

For some reason she's now fond of Zothani. I don't know if it's a way of getting him closer so that she can eliminate him like my dad, I want Zothani to keep his distance, I don't trust my mother one bit.

He opens the door for me, there's nothing I want more than to be safe inside his car.

I get in and lean back on the seat and release a huge breath.

Zothani settles on his seat and looks at me curiously.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I know I can’t, but I need a drink,” I say.

“You’re right, you can’t. Need something else.”

“A new mother,” I say.

“I can’t give you that, I’m sorry.”

I look for his peppermint sweets, he always have them in the car. I don’t even know how to tell him this. I’m really a witch’s daughter.

“Are you safe?” he asks.

I look up with two sweets in my mouth.

I actually laugh at the word ‘safe.’

“What does that mean? Being safe,” I ask.

“Then come back, I don’t want to lose you or my baby,” he says

I sigh heavily and start telling him about what my mother said regarding my dad’s disappearance. He doesn’t look surprised at all, even though I suspected something of this nature, I did not expect her to confess with that devil-may-care tone.

“She doesn’t think she did anything wrong, that’s what scares me the most,” I tell him.

He shakes his head; there’s devil, then there’s MaKhumalo.

“I really don’t want you to belong here anymore. I know we are just becoming parents and have a lot to learn about each other, but I did this a couple days ago,” he says opening his hand for me.

I'm looking at his hand and I don't see anything.

"I love you," he says.

I see it, my mouth drops open.

It's an S tattooed on his ring finger like a wedding band.

"Did you do this for me?" I ask.

"Yes, I want you to be a Zungu. I transferred the damages money to Manzini and half of the lobola money to my brother," he says.

I'm speechless. We didn't talk about getting married, our main focus was to have a baby, nevertheless I'm happy he's planning on making me his wife. I can't say I'm still happy to be a Mhlongo.

**“I don’t know what to say. I love you
Manzini.”**

**He smiles, “That’s all I want to hear
anyway. Can I have my kiss now?”**

**They say when you are with your soul mate
you forget about every bad thing, I guess
he’s the one for me. I’ve quickly forgotten
about mother witch, I’m happy and safe.**

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**Everything looks good, my baby is growing
well. I can’t wait for him or her to arrive.**

**Zothani promised me he will take a
paternity leave for the first two months to
stay with us. He’s going to be a great father,
that I’m sure of.**

He's holding my hand, we are watching the monitor as Dr Augustine moves the transducer on my tummy.

“Can you tell the gender now?”

What? I look at him with my eyes widen.

Why does he wants to know the gender now, we agreed on waiting until I give birth.

“I'm curious babe, I can't wait,” he says.

Augustine is now looking at me, I have the final call.

“Really babe?” I'm giving him an eye.

“Please, I want to start thinking of the names.”

I roll my eyes and look back at Augustine.

“Is it a girl?” I ask.

Nokwanda badly wants a sister.

“It has to be a boy,” Zothani argues.

Another shock! I thought he didn’t have any specific gender that he wants, to me he said he’d be happy with neither a girl nor boy.

“You want a boy?” I ask.

“You want a girl?” he asks me.

Augustine chuckles, “It’s me who can put an end to this fight. Dad wins, you’re having a little prince.”

I hate losing but my eyes are tearing, my heart has been filled with so much joy.

Zothani smashes his lips on me and kisses me until I run out of breath. I’ve seen him

happy but today surpasses all those moments.

“Thank you so much my love. I’ve been waiting for this moment for years. This is greatest of all gifts you could’ve given me other than your love.” He’s holding me with his left hand. There’s a mark symbolizing his love for me; I have his heart.

“It doesn’t mean you will make him play soccer,” I say.

He laughs, “No, he will have the right to choose which position he wants to play.”

“Zothani you’re not going to coach my son,” I mean it.

If my son wants to be a DJ, I don’t want him to drag him to a soccer field.

Augustine puts out yet another fight, she gives me my vitamins and religiously tells me what to avoid in my diet and what to look out for before my next appointment.

I need more of his peppermint sweets. He's taking something from the boot, I'm here trying not to think about the news I have to break to my family later. I just found out that I'm carrying a boy, my son, I should be my happiest.

He opens his door and settles on his seat.

“Babe I can't drive you back home,” he says.

“Why?” I ask.

“I have to go somewhere, I will drop you at Ballito, from there you will take q taxi to Stanger and one home,” he says.

I don't mind taking taxis but he could've told me on time.

**“Can't you get someone to take me home?”
I ask.**

“Unfortunately no, you will use taxis,” he says.

A deep breath! I'm not man, I'm absolutely fine.

“Okay,” I fold my arms and look outside the window.

“Are you angry?” he asks.

“No, why would I be angry?”

“Exactly, why would you be angry? It’s not like I’m not going to give you the taxi fare.”

“Mxm!” I click my tongue loud.

I didn’t mean to, he’s just so annoying.

And what’s funny, why is he laughing?

“Are you scared taxi drivers will ask you out?”

I turn my eyes to him with my brows snapped.

“Scared? No I’m not scared, at least those taxi drivers can make me their first priority and make sure I get home safely,” I say. I thought I went for his jugular, but he’s still laughing.

I’m not talking to him until further notice.

We are in Ballito, he drives past the first robots, I don't know where he's going to drop me now. We turn onto Moffat drive, I'm no longer sure where he's taking me.

"There's no taxi rank where we are going," I tell him.

"I know, I'm picking a friend that I'm driving to Durban then dropping you off at the taxi rank," he says.

I don't want to be a whining bitch, but wow!

"So this friend is more important than me?" I ask.

"No, but it makes sense to me that you take a taxi and I drive him to his destination. I mean, I've known him longer and we are tight," he says.

So the stupid tattoo was just a game. Even me giving him a son doesn't mean that much, he still cares more about his friends than me.

“He's a salesmanager here,” he's driving into Ballito Volkswagen.

I don't respond, I don't care about this friend.

“Maybe we should talk to him about you getting a car,” he says.

“I don't like VW, thanks but no thanks,” I say.

“You don't like it?” He sounds a bit concerned.

“No I don't. Can you hurry up? Taxis won't wait for me.”

He climbs out and comes to my side. I don't want to go anywhere.

“Fetch your friend, I will be here,” I say.

He pulls my arm, smiling gently.

“Please, just come and say hello,” he begs.

He's really provoking me, but he will be offended if I give him attitude in front of the people. I agree, just for peace sake.

He holds my hand and leads me in.

I don't know if the mid-aged white man shaking his hand is the friend we are here to pick up. He's smiling and constantly glancing at me. With my huge tummy and hands on the waist, I'm chewing my bottom lip and giving mean girlfriend vibes.

I wait while he follows the man inside the office. This makes me hate the friend more, whether he's that white man or not.

After a moment they come out, now I'm sure I look like I want to murder one of them.

"Where's your friend?" I ask.

"This way," he pulls my hand.

Okay, why are we in the show room?

"Babe what's going on?" I ask, pulling my hand.

"Just come," he says.

My heart is beating fast. I've had enough surprises today, good and bad.

"Zothani!" I'm pulling him back. He's standing in front of a VW Golf R with a red

bow on top. I want us to go, whatever he thinks he's doing, I don't want him to do it. I don't really mean that by the way, I just don't know what to do.

“I really can't drive you back home, one of the boys broke an arm at the gym, his family is away, I need to go to the hospital. Are you going to drive yourself back home or I must get you a driver?” He takes out the car keys and gives me.

I fall on my knees and cry. He bought me a fuckin' car!

“No, no, no!” I'm in disbelief.

I don't know how long it would've taken me to get another car. Probably forever with this drama going on in my life.

“Yes mamakhe, it’s yours.” He lifts me up and smashes his lips on mine.

I’m crying; it’s happiness. He holds my waist, gently brushing my tummy with one hand.

“I love you Salo, you and our son,” he says.

“I love you too. Thank you so much babe, I can’t believe you did this.”

Wow, I love VW! My second toy is white as a snow. I’m going to take care of her, no crashing, no scratching.

“Let’s get inside and take pictures,” I say.

He laughs, “Just say you want me to take pictures of you.”

Well, that’s exactly what I want, I used ‘we’ to sound humble.

Oh boy, it smells brand new.

I cannot say thank you enough.

“I’m going to tattoo your name on my chest,” I say.

He laughs, “That would be amazing to be forever on your skin.”

We both go for a car spin before he gets into his. He’s going to see his player in La Lucia Healthcare. I’m going back home as a car owner again, I wish I can celebrate with my father and take him for a spin.

I’m exiting the N2, he flashes blinkers.

I flash mine back, smiling ear to ear. God didn’t bless me with a good family, but when it was time for him to plan my relationship, he excelled.

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2PM NEWS, EAST COAST RADIO

"Two people injured and one dead after a car crashed into a truck on the N2 South Bound..."

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 44

SALO MHLONGO

Had my life been normal, I would've made a big entrance with my new car. I drive through the gate and park in front of the house. My mother must've heard the car driving in, she steps outside with her hand shielding the sun from her face.

“Whose car is this now?” she asks.

“Mine, Zothani bought it,” I say.

Within a minute she's on the car hugging it and ululating. I know she'll love the car more than me, just like the last time. I watch her as she celebrates, I'm happy too, just not in the mood to do this with her.

“If you do anything funny to ruin your relationship with this boy, I will personally punish you,” she says, laughing.

In my mind I have no doubt that she means what she’s saying, she’d probably kill me because Zothani has proven to be a ticket to a fancy life. I won’t forget that she hated him and wanted to kill our son anytime soon.

“This is what I wanted for you,” she says.

“Come on Ma, you don’t want me to have a family, dad told me.” I’m done pretending like I don’t know. My dad who badly wanted to protect her is now somewhere, running from her.

“Umkhwenyana has proven himself now. At least he’s not like your father who

couldn't take care of me. As old as I am, I've never driven a car," she says. One thing about her she's got no remorse whatsoever. My mother can do you wrong and expects you to be grateful because in her head she does everything she does for a good cause.

"Now I need to teach you how to make sure he doesn't look at other women," she says as we enter the kitchen.

I can't help but laugh. What a joke my darling!

"Are you sure you can be a good teacher in that department?" I mean, this is the same woman who was talking suicide after being cheated on.

“Even if he looks somewhere else, he will always come back to you,” she says.

I shake my head, “No thanks, if he decides to leave and don’t come back, I will gladly let him go.”

“That’s because you are a stupid girl. This boy can do everything for you, and maybe even take your siblings to study overseas.

Uzoba phakathi komhlane nembeleko, from here he’s buying you a double-storey house, then you can take us out of the township.”

Take them with me? One reason I can’t wait for Zothani and I to start planning our marriage is because I no longer want to be a part of this mediocre.

“Not today, thanks for your concern. I have to call MaNkosi to come over, the sooner we find a solution, the better,” I say.

She doesn't argue, I call MaNkosi and ask that she comes over urgently. I'm going to expose my mother, I will put Sbonga, Sekhona and Nondu on a conference call since they cannot be here.

I boil water for tea while we wait for MaNkosi. My mother doesn't care, I think she's somehow cursed and slowly losing her mind. It's not possible for a living human being to have no conscience like this.

MaNkosi arrives, she's always been down to earth and soft-spoken. Nondu is a

complete opposite of her, not that her personality is out there either but she's got a pretty sharp mouth.

“Sally why are you scaring me?” She's panting just from crossing the road. Nzuzo is behind her as usual, this is something my son will never experience- granny's love.

“I'm sorry, it's kind of urgent, Ma is in the lounge,” I tell her.

“Is everyone okay though?” she asks.

“I can say that even though Babana is still not home,” I say and pull Nzuzo to stay behind.

Kids grow fast, I can't wait for my son to play with him.

“Do you want to have a cousin to play with?” I ask him.

He shakes his head.

Okay.

“What if it’s another boy like you?” I ask.

“No,” his answer is sharp. He didn’t even give it a second thought.

I’m a little disappointed, hopefully he will change his mind as months go by.

I give him a packet of chips and snap selfies to send to Nondu. I also send one to Zothani, just showing him that I’m already practicing being a boy mom. The message only ticks once, he must be on the road.

“Do you miss mommy Nzuzo?” I ask.

I know Nondu misses him like crazy.

He doesn’t answer.

I look up from the tray I’m setting,

“Nzu?”

He licks chips crumbs off his little fingers and looks up.

“I miss coach,” he says.

“Zothani? You like him, wow.” I’m surprised because they haven’t known each other for too long. Zothani will be thrilled to hear this.

“No, the coach who’s my baba,” he says.

My heart almost stops on Nondu’s behalf. Why would he miss someone he’s only seen once?

“Did he tell you that he’s your baba?” I ask.

He shakes his head. I don’t want to ask him too many questions but I just wonder how he knows that Solwazi is his father.

“Why do you miss him?” I ask.

“Because you and mommy have your baba. I want to have my baba and play the ball,” he says.

I’m not sure how Nondu will react when she hears this. I always hear people calling kids hypocrites, this case is a good example, I don’t understand why Nzuzo would crave to have someone he’s never had in his life.

“But you have Lume, right?” I look at his face, his reaction is that of a happy child.

“Lume plays with me and Piwe, and carries me in his arms, he doesn’t say Nzu you are heavy,” he says.

Definitely Nondu tells him that he’s heavy.

“When is Lume coming?” He’s looking at me with so much hope. I might regret bringing him up.

“When he’s not working,” I say.

He’s staring at me, he doesn’t understand.

“Tomorrow,” I lie.

A specific answer is what he wanted; he nods and eats his chips. I hope he doesn’t cry when Nkalipho doesn’t show up tomorrow.

I take tea to the two old ladies and disconnect my phone from the charger.

“MaNkosi it’s me who called this meeting, I will put everyone on loudspeaker, I think this affects the family as a whole,” I say.

She looks at my mother with a slight frown.

“Is this about Njomane?” she asks.

“Yes, it’s about him....” I call Nondu first and then add others to the call

My mother is sitting comfortably on the couch with her black beret worn to the side. How is she not scared?

“Can everyone hear me?” I ask the ones on the line.

“Yes, I can,” – Nondu.

“Me too,” – Sekhona.

“Whose car did you post on your story?” Of course that’s Sbonga.

That question gets my mother excited, she sits up straight and explains that ‘my supportive babydaddy bought it for me’. If I

don't stop her she will turn this meeting to be about my relationship. She's just bragging and I don't like that one bit.

“Can we talk about the urgent matter?” I ask.

Everyone keeps quiet.

“I had a talk with my mother and she admitted bewitching dad. She says she was trying to kill him as a favor to this family,” I say.

I think it's Sbonga who screamed and dropped something on the floor. Others are quiet, MaNkosi is looking at my mother shocked.

“Is this true MaKhumalo?” she asks.

“I was protecting myself. Do you know that him and Thembelihle tried to kill me?”

Wait...

“Isn’t Aunt Teekay dead?” I ask.

MaNkosi looks away.

“No, she was never dead. Her and your father went to a witchdoctor called Magagula to try and kill me, luckily there was a young man who knows my good heart, he stopped them,” my mother says.

I’ve never been so confused in my life.

“Is this true MaNkosi?” I look at her.

“It’s true that my sister is still alive but nobody has ever tried to kill your mother. My sister is in hiding because your mother wants her dead,” she says.

“Why would I want her dead? I’ve let her sleep with my husband for years because I

understand that no man wants her. After everything I've done for her, allowing my husband to service iskrebha sakhe now I'm being accused of trying to kill her." She claps her hands in disbelief.

"Iskrebha?" – Sbonga is back on the call.

"Sbonga!" I warn. Sekhona is listening to this, some things are not appropriate to be repeated over and over again.

MaNkosi sighs heavily and asks, "Is Njomane dead or alive?"

"That's what I need to know as well.

Sekhona is too young to handle this, I'm pregnant and unable to go to certain places, so I wanted to ask you MaNkosi as an elder in this family if you can consult from traditional seers," I say.

“But your mother can go back where she got her muthi from and ask for help.”

I guess that could’ve been an easy solution, I just don’t know if I trust her enough to let her go and find us help.

“Yoooh! Did dad lie about the food you were crying for that day Ma?” – Sbonga.

I’m not sure what she’s talking about.

“That was a love potion, I wasn’t bewitching anyone,” my mother responds.

I’ve ran out of shock, she’s something else.

I’m not happy with Nondu and Sekhona’s silence.

“Nondu what do you think?” I ask. This is a family meeting, everyone has to say something.

**“I’m just listening, I have nothing to say,”
she says.**

It’s not like her not to have an opinion.

**But I let it go and move to the next one,
“Sekhona?”**

“I’m here sisi,” he says.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

This might be too heavy for him.

“Can she leave my father’s house, please?”

Wooooah! He’s only 15 years old.

“I understand you are angry and...”

**“No, she must leave my father’s house and
go away.” There’s so much anger in his
voice, I’m scared because boys tend to be
impulsive and he has school to attend.**

Maybe telling them was not a good idea.

“I’m not leaving the house. Why is Sekhona acting like I bombed a village?” my mother.

“Because we might not have a father because of you Ma,” – Sbonga.

I didn’t expect her to jump in. I didn’t know if she’s taking this seriously or not.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” my mother says.

“Salo can you book her for a mental evaluation?” – Sbonga.

“I’m not crazy!” – my mother.

This is getting chaotic. My day went to 100 and then dropped back to 0 in a matter of hours.

I just want my man, he’s the only thing that brings me joy.

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DR NKATHA ZUNGU

One of the police officer who first got to the scene is someone he knows. He received a call saying his brother was involved in a car accident. He didn't panic, Zothani has been through accidents in the field and with motor vehicles before. He left the surgery right away and drove to the scene. He wanted to get there and tell Zothani that he won't keep surviving if he doesn't stop being reckless in life. Yes he's grown a bit, especially after meeting Salo, but that last born vibe is still there. Nkatha planned on

calling his father who's a bit strict than their mother and tell him so that he will scold Zothani.

Upon arriving he was told that two people were badly injured and one was dead. His brother was among the injured ones, he thought. Zothani's car was still recognizable, only the front and windscreen were completely damaged. The paramedics were there to help, he was making his way to them when Msimang stopped him.

“Kubi Manzini,” Msimang said.

He knows Msimang from back in the days when he was still with Nokwanda's mother.

“Thanks for letting me know. Where are they taking them?” he asked.

Msimang exhaled deeply and looked at him apologetically.

“I’m sorry mfowethu, your brother did not make it...”

He doesn’t remember much of what took place afterwards. Zothani was covered by a white sheet. It was really him, the same brother he was talking to on the phone less than an hour ago; the excited father-to-be who couldn’t wait to meet his son. The coroner arrived to assess the scene, he died from the accident but further investigations still need to be conducted.

He had already identified Zothani’s body, as his body was transported to the morgue he had to take some of Zothani’s valuables from the car and head home to his parents.

They're old, their father is constantly sick, Mam' Zungu is diabetic. How does he break the news to them? The mother of his unborn child, where does he begin telling her that she no longer have a partner in this world? That a man she planned a family with has left her to take care of that family alone? That she will never see him, hear his voice, or touch him again?

To his son when he grows up and asks for his dad, what is he going to say? How is he going to explain why he doesn't have a father while other kids have fathers?

The timing wasn't right Zothani...

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 45

DR NKATHA ZUNGU

He finds his parents in the sitting room. They're watching TV, with no idea that they're about to bury their son. They always encouraged them to pray before taking any journey and eating any meal. But they didn't see the need for it, instead they always made fun of their praying addiction. Today he's wondering if the accident would've happened if Zothani had prayed before getting on the road. He walks in with Zothani's gym bag.

“This is a surprise,” his mother says.

They’re staring at him, suspecting that something is wrong.

He throws the bag on the floor and sinks down on the coach with his hands over his head.

“Are you okay ndodana?” Zungu asks, reaching to his shoulder.

One tear drops, he looks up and breaks the news. “Zothani was involved in a car accident. He’s no more baba, my brother is dead.”

Despite him being the frail one, Zungu rushes over to his wife who’s struggling to breathe and fans her face with his hand.

“Nkatha don’t come here and scare your mother like this. Where is Zothani?”

“Akekho baba, usishiyile.” Nkatha is holding back tears.

One has to be strong, clearly not his parents, it’s him who has to handle everything.

It takes time for his mother to gain back her composure.

“I told Zothani to pray,” she says, her voice filled with regret.

“It’s too late for that, we have to notify the church and relatives,” – Zungu.

Mam’ Zungu continues to shed tears.

“Couldn’t God spare his life until he meets his child! What are we going to tell umntanabantu and his young boys?”

Nkatha heaves a deep sigh, “I don’t know Ma, his girlfriend is pregnant, hearing such

news may put a strain on her health. She's still dealing with the disappearance of her father, I don't even know who to contact because her mother might use this to her advantage since she didn't want her to have a baby in the first place."

"But she has to know, maybe she's trying to call him and doesn't understand why he's not answering," Zungu says.

"I know baba, I will let her family know. For now I need to call Nokwanda and Aunt Thumelina," Nkatha says.

There's a lot that he still needs to come to reality with. Right now he just needs to do what needs to be done; getting the family together for funeral arrangements. It wasn't supposed to be this way. They were

supposed to bury their parents first, then Zothani to bury him because he's the oldest.

He doesn't tell Nokwanda why she needs to come home, but she wants to know.

"Please tell me what's so urgent," she begs.

"It's your grandmother who got bad flue, take my car and come here." He thinks he's covered up, he cannot tell her the truth because she has to drive. Knowing how much she adored her uncle this would be too devastating for her.

"Nkatha, no!!!" She screams over the phone.

"Nokwanda?" He's panicking.

"It's Zothani's car, they say he's dead, it's all over Facebook."

There goes their privacy as a family! People couldn't grant them just a mere day to inform their relatives about the death, it's now national news.

“Don't drive, someone will pick you up,” he says.

Nokwanda is crying inconsolably on the other side. This is just the beginning of it, he's yet to feel powerless and useless to all Zothani's loved ones.

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NONDUMEZULU

I didn't expect anything less from Mam' Busi. It puzzled Salo why I kept quiet on the phone while they were discussing Babo's disappearance. I'm glad everyone is now aware of what's been happening in the family, however I'd like to distance myself from the drama and focus on my own journey.

I'm not pregnant, I took three tests and they all came back negative. Talk about a narrow escape! I have to go to the clinic before I see Nkalipho again. I cannot trust condom with him, he burst and doesn't pull out. I have to be the one taking precautions because next time I won't be so lucky.

Things have been great ever since we had an honest sex conversation.

When my phone rings I smile thinking it's him, only to check and see that it's Dr Manzini. My heart skips a beat, this man has my future in the palm of his hand..

I answer after clearing my throat numerously.

"Hi Nondumezulu," he says in a deep, low voice.

"Hello Dr Manzini," I'm anxious.

"Are you home?" he asks.

"No, I'm not home," I say, a bit confused.

"Who can I talk to regarding your sister?"

"My sister? What's wrong with Salo?" I did speak to her on the phone not so long ago but his tone is freaking me out.

“It’s about my brother, I have to talk to an elder, preferably not her mother.”

He sounds so broken, I don’t mean to be nosy but I ask,

“Is Zothani okay?”

“No, he’s passed away.”

I swear my heart almost leaped out of my throat.

Zothani can’t be dead. He was healthy, he had muscles and was always smiling. He’s expecting a baby, he’s about to be a father.

“Wh...aat?” My voice cuts to a low whisper.

I’m shaking because I know what this will do to Salo.

“Yeah, he’s no longer with us, he had a car accident, she has to know. But the delivery has to be well well-constructed, I don’t want anything happening to the baby,” he says.

“I will give you my mother’s name, they’re still together,” I tell him.

“Thank you very much,” he says and ends the call.

I send him my mother’s number and call Nkalipho right away. He might be on the road too, he needs to drive safely.

“I was just thinking about you,” he answers.

“Baby where are you?” My voice is shaking, I’m still freaked out, death is so sneaky.

“I’m home. Is everything okay?” he asks.

“Don’t drive today, stay where you are.” I know this sounds stupid because car accidents are not the way to die, there are thousand other way, he can die even in his home.

“Is there a storm outside?” he asks.

“No,” I take a deep breath and tell him, “Zothani was involved in a car accident, he’s dead. Can you not drive this week?”

“That’s so sad. I talked to him not so long ago. But it’s not possible for me not to drive babe, you know that. I can just promise you that I won’t drink before driving and...”

“How about you don’t drink at all?” I ask.

A moment of silence passes, then he chuckles.

“Okay, I won’t drink,” he says.

I don’t believe him.

“Are you going to come home to your sister?”

“I can only go for the funeral with her. I don’t know if Dr Manzini will let her live with her mother or they will fetch her, because there’s a lot going on at home, she might not get the support she needs,” I say.

“It’s understandable because she’s pregnant. Do you want me to come over?”

“No, unless if you’re going to fly here,” I say.

He laughs.

I do miss him but I don't want to hold my breath for hours thinking of all the bad thing that could happen to him on the road.

I need to take my mind off Zothani's death. I switch the TV on and watch Dr Phil. My Whatsapp notifications roll in, I check while praying it's not Salo. I don't even know what I'm going to say to her after she finds out. Unlike me, she didn't disappoint her parents, she waited for the right guy and fell pregnant when she's financially and emotionally stable. She doesn't deserve this, their love was so beautiful to watch. Two hours ago she posted his hand with an S tattoo, which I assume stands for her name. But no, it's not her but Solwazi. I

don't know why he's sending me pictures of the empty yard.

Oh, here come a message explaining.

Actually not explaining, but making demands.

What do you want me to do? I've tried everything, my son has to come and see where his ancestors are, - it reads.

Solwazi makes a few phone calls and sneaks up on my son during a tournament and then calls that 'trying everything'.

Where is his uncle? He hasn't made any contact, my mother has never rejected any calls.

*Send your uncle to talk to my mother and stop messaging me with different numbers.

I have a life, you're not one of the things I

prioritize in giving attention,* I respond and delete all the pictures he sent. I don't know where this is, it looks like he's in a village and desperate for Nzuzo to be there with him. I never thought I'd see this day where him, Solwazi Dlomo, needs my son in his life. For the longest time I wanted it to happen, just not anymore, he's late.

*Ngale ndoda nje enamehlo aphambene!
This is about our son, culturally he needs his father,*- him again.

Fine, I will go down to that level with him. He's not going to insult Nkalipho with his eye condition, something he still struggles to embrace, and then hides behind Nzuzo needing him culturally.

***My son doesn't need you, he only knows you as a coach, a mean one for that matter. Don't ever call yourself his father, you denied that role 8 years ago. I'm not going to dance to the tune of your fart. Don't ever talk about my boyfriend like that, masende ano-lace. Ungabhodleli kimi iskhokho sikanyoko,* - I send and block the number right away.**

I know soon he will be texting or calling with a different one. This is turning into a harassment, I doubt he's even told his family about this, he just wants Nzuzo to be handed over to him just because he feels like it. Over my un-pregnant body!

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

MaNkosi was leaving, about to cross the road, when her phone rang. She checked the number and couldn't recognize it. She answered with a little hesitation.

Then a man's voice came through, talking softly and humbly.

"I'm Nkatha Zungu, a brother to the father of Salo's unborn baby," he introduced himself.

MaNkosi instantly remembered the name, he's the one who promised her daughter a job.

"How are you ndodana?" she asked.

“I don’t have good news Ma. Are you with Salo?”

“I just left her house, she’s with her mother.”

“My brother was involved in a car accident and unfortunately he didn’t make it.”

“Hawu nkosi yami! I’m very sorry to hear that ndodana, condolences to you and the family,” – MaNkosi.

“Thank you Ma. Can you please deliver the news to her and her mother in the best way possible?” Nkatha asked.

“Of course, I will talk to her mother then we will find a way to tell her.”

She knew it was going to be heavy news to break. They’ve just dealt with Sekhona fighting MaKhumalo over the phone,

wanting her out of the house. Salo is still stressed by the chaos going on and now this!

“Why are you coming back you’ve eaten?” Busisekile asks, looking at MaNkosi as she walks back in.

“We have to discuss something, it’s urgent,” MaNkosi says.

She doesn’t say anything spicy, she follows MaNkosi to the kitchen, Salo is locked in her room, she’s angry.

They sit, MaNkosi exhales heavily.

“I just got a call from the doctor, the brother of the father of Sally’s baby.”

Busisekile frowns, “Where did he get your number?”

“From Nondumezulu, I think,” MaNkosi says.

“How does Nondu know doctors?” – Busisekile.

“That’s not important, he was telling me that there’s been a car accident that involved the father of Sally’s baby,” MaNkosi says with her voice kept low.

“Is he dead or alive?” – Busisekile.

MaNkosi exhales heavily, “Unfortunately, he didn’t make it.”

She stands, hands over her head, and lets out a sharp cry.

“MaKhumalo you have to calm down, what do you want her to do if it’s bow you who’s crying like she lost her boyfriend?”

MaNkosi pulls her down, irritated.

“You don’t understand MaKhumalo, you’ve never had a son-in-law who respect you.

This boy was like a son to me!” She’s still crying.

“Bakithi MaKhumalo, you will cry later then. Right now we have to go and tell Sally.”

“My enemies don’t rest, I never thought they’d hurt me like this. My daughter was about to get married, he just bought her a car today and now a few hours later he’s dead. This is a work of this township’s witches,” – MaKhumalo.

She's wiping her tears as they make their way to Salo's room.

MaNkosi knocks softly, "It's MaNkosi, can we see you in the lounge?"

The door opens after a moment, it looks like she was sleeping.

"Is everything alright?" she asks, rubbing her eyes.

"Let's go and sit," MaNkosi says.

Her mother gently pulls her hand and leads her to the lounge.

They all sit down.

"I don't know how to tell you this mntanami. I will start by saying for now you'll feel like it's the end of the world, it

won't be easy, healing will take time," –
MaNkosi.

Salo frowns, "Healing?"

MaNkosi glances at Busisekile, she's staring
at her hands.

"We received a call from the brother of the
father of your baby. It's said that he was
involved in a car accident, he's no longer
with us," MaNkosi breaks the news.

"Who?" – Salo.

"The father of your child mntanami. I'm
very sorry, your mother and I are here for
you. It's going to be okay, he's now in a
better place."

"Zothani?" She's confused, looking at them
like they've lost their marbles.

“Yes,” MaNkosi nods.

“I was with him today. We went to gynecologist, then he surprised me with a car and kind of proposed marriage to me,”- Salo.

“That was his goodbye my child, at least he was happy in his last hours.”

“MaNkosi why are you not laughing? This is not a good joke but at least laugh about it. Where’s my phone? I will put him on speaker.” She stands and goes to her bedroom.

This is harder than MaNkosi thought.

She comes back with the phone in her ear, she doesn’t sit. She keeps redialing and pacing up and down restlessly.

She dials another number, Nokwanda’s.

Nokwanda answers, “Hey Salo.”

“Where is Zothani?”

Instead of answering Nokwanda cries hysterically on the other side.

The truth sinks in, Salo’s knees tremble, she sinks down on the couch slowly.

“Ma what did you do to him?” She’s not crying, just shaking uncontrollably.

“Huh?” Busisekile frowns.

“You killed Zothani? Ma, you killed my love! It’s you!” She’s suddenly screaming and pointing at her mother.

Busisekile looks at MaNkosi, “Tell her, was I not crying in the kitchen? How can she accuse me of such after I have cried so

much hearing about this. Was I driving the car?”

“She’s hurting,” MaNkosi says.

Salo shakes her head, “This woman killed the love of my life. It’s done, consider me dead too, I’m cutting the umbilical cord.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 46

SALO MHLONGO

I have called him more than 50 times, his phone is not going through. He didn't check the pictures of me and Nzuzo that I sent him. What is now the last messages that I sent him, he didn't read. I don't know how I was able to drive from Mandeni to here, I don't remember anything on the road, it's like I blanked out and woke up here.

I'm in my place, I left with everything that's mine. If my father doesn't come home there will be no reason for me to ever set my foot there again. I don't know what's next for my life, like I really don't know. I had plans, they were with him. I didn't have plans of me alone, I don't want to be without him. I feel hated by God, what sin did I commit that was so big?

My phone has been ringing for the past half an hour. I don't have the strength to check who it is. I'm lying on the couch, he's kicking today, almost every 10 minutes. I think he's the reason why I haven't hung a rope around my neck and ended it all. I don't know what I'm going to tell him when he grows up. I've never not have a father in my life, I don't know what he's going to go through in life without one, I won't even be able to guide him. If Nzuzo, who's never had a father figure in his life until Nkalipho, can start saying he misses his baba, what are the chances that mine won't have any gap in his life?

I hear someone knocking at the door. I give no response, I have no strength in me.

“Salo,” that’s Nondu’s voice.

It sounds like she’s inside. I must’ve left the door open.

She appears with Nkatha behind her. I don’t know where she lives and how she teamed up with Nkatha to come here, the last time I checked they didn’t like each other.

“Mntase are you okay?” She sits next to me and holds my hand.

Nkatha stands.

I don’t think she means her question, because how can I be okay?

“Ma called saying you left. Sbonga, Malum’ Khumalo and everyone is worried about you. You can’t be here alone,” she says.

I open my mouth to tell her I prefer to be here, Zothani’s clothes are in my wardrobe, he still smells in my bedroom, his greens are in my fridge. But my voice doesn’t come out.

“I understand why you don’t want to be home. But you can’t stay here alone, you have to come and stay with me for a while or go to Malum’ Khumalo,” she says.

Nkatha clears his throat, “Or with us.”

Nondu turns to look at him, “No, she can’t, they were not married. She will be there before the burial to get cleansed.”

“She can come to my place, there’s someone who can look after her,” – Nkatha.

“Guys I’m not crippled, I know you’re worried. I will go to my uncle’s place but I have to see him first.” My voice comes out strong but within a second there’s a burning lump in my throat. I know they wouldn’t play with something like this but maybe he will wake up if I go there. He will remember what he’s leaving behind and come back.

“Please breathe,” Nkatha says.

He’s right beside me, I’m struggling to breathe.

I want to scream and cry my lungs out but somehow my chest is tightened.

There's some commotion; Nondu is running around, Nkatha is screaming orders to her. The last thing I see is the white walls, after that I can't breathe anymore. I'm following him...dying.

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NONDUMEZULU

It's 7 pm, we are only leaving the hospital now. Salo has been admitted, I think she's better here than in the village with her uncle. It's been a really long day, we were in there for over 4 hours waiting for her to wake up.

I didn't remember that Nkatha is my possible boss while we were in there. We were just two people concerned about Salo. But now sitting with him in the car at night intimidates me. The two encounters we've had weren't the most pleasant ones, he thinks I have behavioral problems, which I admit is true now, but still I feel like he's not a warm person. I don't understand how he can look like Zothani so much, yet acts so different from him. Zothani was a people's person. Man, he joked and laughed. And he loved loudly and unconditionally.

“Are you hungry?” His deep voice gives me a fright.

I didn't expect him to speak.

“Ummm, yes. But I will cook something in the house,” I say.

“No need, we can get take-aways. I’m sure you’re tired, it’s been a long day.”

He’s very thoughtful, I’m tired, I would’ve just eaten bread and slept. He drives to one of the restaurants in Ballito, Fiamma Grill. He doesn’t order anything, I thought he was hungry too.

Things are expensive here, hey. Some I don’t even know what they’re, I’m looking for something normal. I finally decide to get lasagna di carne; they say it has grounded beef, pasta sheets and mozzarella. I have it as a take-away, it costs a whooping R150, God forbid! I internally scream everytime I

pay the braai-pack price for four pieces of chicken at KFC.

He's quiet the rest of the journey. I understand what he's going through, I don't have siblings but I felt lost when my father died. I want to give him comforting words but I don't know how to. We are not close, it may be inappropriate, maybe he wants to deal with it in silence.

He only opens his mouth when he asks for directions to my place. I have to respect his space and not say anything.

He stops outside my gate, "Thank you for today."

"She's my sister," I say.

"I know. Can you please see her in the morning before going to Khan?"

“Yeah, definitely,” I nod.

He searches his pocket and comes back with the black wallet. He’s giving me money, R100. “For taxi,” he says.

“No, there’s no need,” I say.

“Please, I will ask someone to send flowers so that you can take them to her. I have a lot of things to do tomorrow,” he says, sounding evidently stressed.

“Okay. Do you need my address for delivery?”

He nods.

I send it to his phone and take the money.

“Drive safely,” – it slips out of my mouth.

He’s looking at me, for more than a minute.

Maybe I shouldn’t have let that slip out.

“Thanks,” he says.

I close the car door and rush to open my gate. I think it’s way past half seven now, I will take a shower and go to bed, at least I have food.

And then? Nkalipho’s car is here.

This is crazy, I told him not to come.

All lights are off inside the house, which isn’t like him because he hates the dark.

I switch the kitchen light on and here he is, sitting on the kitchen chair with his head buried on the table.

“Hey,” I say, dropping the foodie-bag and my purse on the table.

He doesn't lift his head. I let him be and get myself a glass of water.

When I turn he's lifted his head and he's staring at me. When I catch him doing it he looks away.

"When did you get here?" I ask.

"4:12:33," he says.

He knows even the exact seconds, that's strange.

"I was at the hospital, Salo was admitted," I say.

"Was it hard letting me know over the phone?" Back to square one, he's talking to me but not looking at me. Damn, I haven't checked my phone, it's in my purse.

“There was a lot going on and I didn’t know you are here,” I say.

“I didn’t know they have Uber services around here,” he says.

Uber services?

“That was Dr Manzini,” I say.

He looks at the Fiamma Grill take-away and then nods. It would be very stupid of him to be angry over this. Nkatha is mourning his brother, I wasn’t even there for him but for Salo.

I take my jacket off and hang it over the chair. I want to eat with him but I don’t know if he’s going to want it because he knows I didn’t buy this myself.

“Your money,” he says.

I look at him, confused.

His eyes lead me to the floor, it's the R100
Nkatha gave me.

I didn't put it in my purse, I pull it and put
the money inside.

"Why do you look angry?" I ask him.

"I'm not angry," he denies.

"You're not looking at me, you haven't
hugged or kissed me since I walked in."

"Did you kiss me or hug me when you
walked in?" he asks.

"I called your name and you didn't lift your
head. Was I supposed to kiss the back of
your head? Are you going to eat?"

"No, that's your food," he says.

"Ouch! Are you going to eat bread?"

He gives no answer. He can be my guest then.

I warm my food and sit down with a glass of water and eat.

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He went to bed when I took the shower. I don't know if he faked it or he was really asleep when I came back. At least he didn't sleep outside this time around. I wake up pressed and rush to the bathroom

I brush my teeth and wash my face, I want to go and make him breakfast before he wakes up. He slept without eating, this guy would do anything to prove to you that he's angry.

I make him eggs, mushrooms and bread.
His tea goes with one spoon of sugar, I'm
now sorted, breakfast made.

He's awake when I walk in.

"Morning handsome," I greet and place the
food on top of the bedside cabinet.

I raise my eyes to him. Don't tell me he's
still grumpy!

"Nkalipho come on, you didn't even tell me
you'd be here. We talked, I told you not to
come and you decided to do otherwise
because you have the house keys."

"I just wanted to surprise you," he says.

"Then it's you who got surprised. Seriously
though babe, a lot happened yesterday, I

had to be there for Salo.” I get in bed and pull up the duvet.

“I called and texted you, that’s what frustrated me. I didn’t know where you were, the last time I checked you didn’t know anyone around here. But I get it, I’m glad you’re not letting the family drama get between you and Salo,” he says.

I kiss his cheek, I’m glad we are okay.

“I made you breakfast,” I say.

“Thank you sthandwa, last night I slept angry and didn’t tell you why I’m here.”

He’s getting off the bed, he’s only wearing a short, I’m staring.

“Mmm, what did you want to tell me?”

“That I want you to come over for dinner, my aunt will be home next week Sunday,

hopefully Zothani won't be buried on the same day," he says.

"Ok, no problem. Are you going to the bathroom?" I ask.

He smiles, he can see that I'm in need of his attention right now.

"Yeah, then I will eat," he says.

I raise my eyebrow, "Eat what?"

"Breakfast, what else can I eat?"

"Me," I say.

He smiles, "I'd love to."

He's on my side, hovering over me, he's forgotten about his bathroom need.

He kisses me on the neck, "How do you want me to eat you?"

He already knows the answer.

“Slowly,” I say.

“Everything your heart and body wants, I can give you. I just need you to...” He trails kisses on my neck, pushing his head to my shoulder like he wants me badly. I’m breathing heavily on the pillow.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask between the heavy breaths.

“Don’t do something I wouldn’t do to you, or anything you wouldn’t like to be done to you. I love you, I worry about you like you’re my own child,” he says.

I feel the buried concern in his voice. I place my hands on his face and lock my eyes with his. I care about this person, I may not be emotional transparent as him.

A loud hoot disturbs us, fuck I was about to suck his dick.

My phone is ringing as well. He goes to the bathroom while I attend to it.

It's the delivery man, he's at the gate to drop something.

Nkalipho walks back as I put my robe on.

“Who is it so early in the morning?” He's following me to the door.

I look back and wink. He mustn't worry, we will continue where we left off.

I open the gate, the delivery car drives in.

Nkalipho is right next to me, the man is here to drop the flowers for Salo.

“And then?” – him..

“Dr Manzini asked that I take them to Salo,” I explain.

“Why didn’t he send them straight to the hospital?” he asks.

“I don’t know, he probably didn’t think about it, he just lost his brother,” I say.

“Oh, okay,” he rubs his nose.

Isn’t my life fun? I have two babies to mother, this one is even more childish than Nzuzo.

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MANKOSI

Nzuzo refused to eat breakfast and she has no idea why he's this moody. She thought she'd let him be but the sun is up and he hasn't eaten anything. He's sitting at the door withdrawn from everything, even his favourite toys. What MaNkosi doesn't know is that Salo told him Nkalipho would come for him today and he didn't. He's disappointed and angry at his Lume.

MaNkosi wants to call his mother and tell her, but then she doesn't want her to worry.

She's going to make cupcakes to cheer him up.

Her phone rings as she goes through her old recipe book.

It's a woman she's been trying to get hold of the whole day.

"Gog' Mbuyazi," she answers.

"MaNkosi, I hope all is well," says the woman in a hoarse voice.

"Unfortunately no, things aren't happening the way you said they would. I asked for my husband to fight his way back home, I did the function at the cemetery exactly the way you said." She's sweating within a second. She's not a witch, she didn't even want a revenge, she just wanted her husband to fight until MaKhumalo and Babo willingly bring him back.

"It won't be nice MaNkosi. The sword will hit where it's going to hurt the most, you just have to remember that this isn't your

doing, they did this to themselves, you just want what's yours," Gog' Mbuyazi says.

"But I feel like it's their daughter who's now suffering because of what I did at the cemetery. Her life is falling apart and she's innocent in all this. If my daughter finds out about this she will think I'm not different from them. I shouldn't have done this, it was a bad decision."

"The sins of a father are laid upon his children," – Gog' Mbuyazi.

"No, that's not fair. Can we reverse this? They can keep my husband if they want, my daughter is going to get the job and we will be fine, God will deal with them on his time," she says.

“No MaNkosi, we will not do that, they’re just getting a dose of their own medicine.”

“But it’s ruining a young person’s life!”

“If not their young person, then your young person. It’s how they squared the accounts, they used their child, she gained from their sins and now she’s going to suffer from the repercussions.”

“But she didn’t know all that, can’t she be protected from...” Nzuzo’s loud scream cuts her short. “Let me call you back in a minute,” she ends the call and goes to Nzuzo at the door.

“Come here and see what I’m making you,” she lifts his arm.

Nzuzo pulls it back and shakes his head. He is not crying but he lets out another scream, ear deafening.

It's those tantrums again.

“Who do you want? Mommy?”

He shakes his head.

MaNkosi is confused. There's no other way to get through him if he doesn't communicate what he wants. Unlike Nondu, she can't hit him, she loves him way too much to do that.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 47

NONDUMEZULU

I'm going home for the funeral, Sbonga is coming too. I have one last session left with Dr Khan, from there I will know what my future is. Salo will be going to there with her uncle's wife before the burial, she doesn't want her mother there but I don't think Mam' Busi knows that. Anyway Nkalipho is here to pick me up, I'm excited to be going home, I'm going to see my son. It feels like I haven't seen him in years, he's been refusing to talk to me over the phone the whole week.

He climbs out of the car wearing a black tracksuit and white sneakers. Okay, he's

here with some flowers. How random, the last time he saw flowers he was mad at me, I had to take him with me to the hospital to prove that they really belonged to Salo. I don't know how thinks Dr Manzini and I can do anything special and sneaky for one another during this difficult time.

Moreover, he's old, even though I have a record of dating older men, for instance Solwazi, but Dr Manzini is way too old, he must be 40 or close.

"Are they mine?" I ask.

"Of course," he's hugging me.

I take them and smell them, divine!

"What did I do?" I ask.

"You loved me," he says.

Isn't he cute? I kiss his lips and grab his hand towards the door. I have packed, I was just waiting for him so that we can have lunch together. Living alone sucks when you have to cook and eat your own food, all alone. I cooked rice, cabbage and fish.

He sits on the couch, I go and dish up. My food looks good, I'm not the best cook but here I actually put my best efforts.

"It's good to see you eating healthy," he says, taking the plate.

I frown, "What are you trying to say?"

"You're always eating oily food and taking a lot of caffeine."

I do, he's not lying, but saying I always do it is taking it too far.

“Am I fat?” I’m looking at my arms, I see no flaps.

He laughs, “No, but maybe you should watch what you eat.”

Says the award-winning dietician. I don’t comment furtherly, I dig into my plate, it tastes as good as it looks. I need to enter those TV cooking competitions.

He makes a satisfied moan after swallowing and then looks at me, slowly nodding.

“This is a great birthday lunch,” he says.

My eyes widen, I didn’t hear that wrong.

“Whose birthday?” I ask.

“Mine, I don’t really like the day, please don’t sing,” he says.

I'm perplexed. It's his birthday today and he didn't see the need to tell me? I know we've dated for a little while, I should know such details, but it has never come up.

"Is that why your aunt is coming to your house tomorrow?" I ask.

"Yeah, Masentle always insists on doing a small dinner the next day." To him it's not necessary, this is just another day. I don't want to overreact as I usually do, but I've stopped eating, I'm staring at him.

"You were not going to tell me?" I ask.

"You would've sent me a happy birthday, which I don't like, I have a huge scar that symbolizes this day. But your man is 29 today and happy." His assuring smile

dissolves any other feeling, if he's happy so am I.

"So you don't want any gift for your birthday?" I ask.

He shakes his head, "Let's wait for Valentine's Day and Christmas."

"Not even a blowjob?" I ask.

His lip curves up, he's smiling.

I knew there'd be a way around it.

"Finish your food," I say.

He eats like a child who was promised ice-cream. Two minutes later he's wiped the plate clean, so unbelievable.

"You want more?" I ask.

"No, I'm fine. Why are you eating slowly?"

"This is how I eat babe," I say.

“Hurry up, otherwise we will get there and find Nzuzo asleep.”

It’s way too early, it’s not like we are going to a different province. He just wants me to hurry for the blowjob I promised him. I finish eating and bring him a glass of water. He’s looking at me like I’m the slowest person in the world.

Once I’m finally done I lift him off the couch and pull him to the bedroom. Now he’s smiling, I haven’t seen his smile so wide in a while. I strip my clothes off and push him down on the bed.

He lies on his back and chuckles,

“You’re feisty, please handle me with care.”

Well, he likes it rough, he handles bedroom stuff with care for my sake and he’s still

learning. Today I will allow him to be the way he wants to be, it's his day.

I pull down his pants all the way to his ankles and out. He pushes his boxers out on his owner and lies naked in the bottom. His big guy is still asleep, I'm doing the job from point A. I massage it all around while locking my lips into his.

I feel it growing thick and hard, I go down with my head.

His moans tell me I'm doing a good job.

I'm going in like I have a death wish of dying by choking.

When he starts pulling my hair and thrusting into my mouth, I stop. I don't want him to nut in my mouth, all the cabbage would come out.

I grab a condom, roll it over his dick and then pull him to sit. His temple is pulsating with a visible vein, he's not saying anything, just grabbing me wherever his hands reach and trying to pull me closer.

He stands behind me, I bend over and hold onto the bed.

"I love you baby," he pecks my butt cheek before feeling my folds with his fingers and slowly thrusting in. His pace is controlled, he wants me to be comfortable.

"Harder baby," I say.

He obeys. With each stroke is more pressure, his moans turns into deep groans. He's grabbed my butt-cheeks, pounding in long rapid strokes. I know it will be quick; he loves hardcore but can't handle it.

He goes harder and harder, I end up flat on my stomach, with him lying on my back and grinding me like a mating bull. His hand is around my neck, he's groaning behind my ear, he's feeling it.

“Baby I'm...I'm...oh fuck!” His hand slowly lets go of my neck. He drags his lips on my shoulder, making shivering noises. I think he's satisfied, that's all I wanted.

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We are on our way home. I have bought a few things for my mother and Nzuzo, to buy his peace for whatever I did, Nkalipho paid for everything. He's in a good mood, I guess I will be giving him sexual birthday

gifts since he doesn't want to normally celebrate his birthday.

“What time do we leave tomorrow?”

I look at him with my eyebrows snapped.

We?

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He chuckles, “You don't want me to drive you there. Do you have transport?”

“No, but Mam' Busi will organize it. I don't want you anywhere near her, Salo believes she did something to cause Zothani's accident,” I say.

“But why would she do that? She's pregnant and now with no support, the baby will be her responsibility alone, which will affect her bread-winning abilities,” he says.

I didn't think of it that way. He's giving me something to think about. Mam' Busi is not stupid, she always plans things ahead.

Zothani's death could've just been natural, however I won't rule her out yet. Salo also has every right to suspect her, I'm glad she's keeping her distance.

We have arrived, he's not coming in. He stays in the car and asks that I send Nzuzo out so that he can see him before leaving.

My mom is outside in the washing line.

When she sees me she calls out for Nzuzo to come out. I don't know why he's been refusing to talk to me over the phone, I didn't expect him to come to me running and all happy.

I put everything down and hug him. My baby is grown...well, not really.

“How are you baby?” I ask.

“Good,” he’s looking at the shopping bags.

“Did you miss me?”

“No,” he says.

I knew it, he was angry about something.

“Why didn’t you miss me?”

“Because I don’t like you mommy.”

I laugh, sometimes I think he’s just a pro-version of me with additional features.

“What did I do?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer that, he grabs a packet of chips from the plastic bag and tears it open.

I'm glad he's happy even though he doesn't like me at the moment.

My mother walks in, she asks a few questions about my well-being.

It hasn't been long since I was gone but she's making it sound like a decade.

"You're gaining weight," she says.

"Wow Ma, that's bodyshaming," I tell her.

"No, I'm not shaming you, you are getting fat. That's good though, it shows that you eat and you're happy," she says.

She's from the 70s, it's what she says it is.

"Nkalipho wants to see Nzuzo, he's outside," I say.

She glances at Nzuzo, "I doubt he will go, he's been angry that he wasn't visiting.

Apparently Sally promised her that Nkalipho would come here to visit, I didn't sleep that day," she says.

"You have Nkalipho's number Ma, why didn't you call him?"

She just gives me a look. Sometimes I forget that she acts like she doesn't approve of my relationship, I will have the full stamp only once I'm married.

Fortunately Nzuzo agrees to go to Nkalipho.

They're best friends, he's calling him Lume, all is forgotten now.

"Are you okay big boy?" Nkalipho asks.

He nods, "You cut your hair here?"

He's talking about the beard, it's trimmed.

Nzuzo pays attention to everything.

"I did. You must cut your hair too," –
Nkalipho.

He touches his head, looks at me, then
back at him.

"No, I want to look like my baba," he says.

My ears, there's some wind here, the
windows are down.

"Your what?" I ask.

"My baba is the coach?" He's asking,
staring straight into my eyes.

I feel Nkalipho's hand rubbing me on the
shoulder. He knew I would've said
something out of control, I breathe.

"Yes," I say.

**This is the hardest yes I've ever given.
Solwazi has never claimed him, at least not
in the rightful way. I hate that I have to
admit that he's my son's father and it's the
truth I can't change.**

I hate Solwazi.

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

**It's the big Sartuday, Zothani is being sent
off to his eternal peace. Salo will be
travelling from the Khumalos, which is fine
because they're family. MaNkosi, Sbonga
and Nondu are coming with her. He was**

the father of her first grandchild, obviously she will go there with a big blanket and a bucket of scones, there's a six-pack of Sparletta as well. She wanted to buy more but Sbonga was there, she said it's not a party. She's a more forgiving child than others.

They woke up early because Zothani was unmarried, he will be buried midday. She's wearing the two-piece Njomane bought for her on their 10th anniversary. It still fits, black has always been her color. She's wearing a brown pantyhose and black pumps. Her hat has a brim wide enough to be a mini umbrella, it has feathers at the side.

Sbonga walks in and gives her a look of disapproval.

“You’re not the mother of the deceased,” she says.

“Yes, I’m not. Who said I want to be?”

She’s still looking at her reflection in the mirror, making sure everything is the way it should be.

“You’re overdressed, the hat will bring you a lot of attention,” Sbonga says.

She smiles, “Really?”

“Ma, it’s a funeral!” Sbonga says, giving up.

She, herself, is only wearing an ordinary black dress.

MaNkosi and Nondu arrive, Nzu went to his Lume.

Busisekile looks at them once and exclaims in displeasure. Nondu is okay, but MaNkosi is a no no. That dress almost looks like uniform on her, she's always wearing it. She's obviously doing this on purpose, to sabotage her reputation as the mother of the deceased's babymama.

“What will people think MaNkosi? You're always wearing this dress,” she asks.

MaNkosi frowns, “I'm not always wearing it. Even so, it's suitable for the funeral.”

“But this is not a funeral for Dick or Tom. He was a coach, his team plays on TV. There will be TV people there, they'd be laughing at my daughter,” she says.

Nondu secretly rolls her eyes. Time isn't waiting for them, it looks like they'll be

taking taxis, TV people should be the last thing on anyone's mind.

“Can we just go?” she asks with a low sigh.

“Did everyone eat?” Busisekile asks, adjusting her hat.

Nobody answers, she turns to them.

“I don't want anyone yawning there and eating twice. So is everyone full?” She's not looking at Sbonga, just MaNkosi and Nondu.

“We ate MaKhumalo,” – MaNkosi.

“Okay, we can go. Sbonga don't forget my Bible.”

“A what?” – Nondu can't hold herself, her eyes are widen out of their sockets.

MaNkosi gives her a look- behave.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 48

**“Oh, she finally let you come home,”
Mnguni says as Nkalipho makes his way in.
Nkalipho hangs his jacket over the chair
and sits.**

**“She wasn’t holding me hostage,” he says.
His father chuckles, he’s happy to finally
see his son fully living his life. Now he has
hope of meeting his grandchildren before
he dies. It looks like his heart has finally**

been taking, and Nondu seems to be sticking around even after discovering everything about Nkalipho.

“How is she?” Masentle asks.

It does get a bit lonely for her to live in a male-dominated household. Only if Nondu came to visit from time to time.

“She’s good,” Nkalipho says.

“Just good?” – Mnguni.

“What do you want me to say Mnguni? She’s good; healthy and happy.”

“She missed dinner last night,” Mnguni says. He was expecting Nondu to show up, even though it wasn’t a direct celebration of Nkalipho’s birthday, but it was about him and the family.

“She had a funeral to attend, she came back tired. At least Nzuzo was here, for me that was enough because on Friday me and her did celebrate,” he says.

Both Masentle and Mnguni stare at him. Since when he allows anyone to celebrate his birthday?

“Where are the pictures?” Masentle asks.

He chokes down a laugh. “It wasn’t that type of celebration. It was a private thing, I didn’t take pictures.” God, this sounds so inappropriate.

His father is still staring. Masentle gets it, he doesn’t.

“A private party?” he asks.

Nkalipho laughs, it’s good to see him dumb for a moment.

“Private Mnguni, private,” Masentle says with an emphasis.

He looks at her, only then the dots connects. It was a private thing between two people. Whatever made his son happy, he’s happy too.

“Can I start expecting grandchildren?” he asks.

Nkalipho’s laugh dies, he grabs a glass and pours water.

Where’s the food anyway?

“Don’t tell me uchama amanzi njengopopo,” Mnguni says, gazing into him.

They talk openly about everything, unless if Sphiwe is around.

“We are not there yet. There are a few things we need to overcome before going to the next step of our relationship,” Nkalipho says.

Masentle is worried. She thought they were past the stage of overcoming things and now just growing together as a couple.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

Nkalipho takes a deep breath, he hasn’t been telling them everything.

“We fight a lot, even though we always work things out but it’s frequent, not normal at all. I love her, she loves me. I think it has a lot to do with our past. I’ve had episodes with her, some where I was insecure, maybe a little bit too demanding as well. Right now Nzuzo’s father is making

contact, like what a perfect time to come back!”

“Is he not married?” Masentle asks.

“He is, I just don’t know why now. He saw me with Nzuzo and decided it was time to play daddy whilst making a fool out of me.” He’s bottled it up for peace sake. Nzuzo is happy to have a father, Nondu doesn’t need any more pressure.

“Block the noise and keep your woman happy,” his father says.

“What if he wants more?” His finger plays on the glass of water.

Mnguni heaves a sigh, “If you can give your woman more there will nothing for you to worry about. You’re aware that everytime she leaves the house men approach her?”

What is this old man saying? His heart almost came out of his mouth.

“Well, I’ve never seen that happening,” he denies.

Masentle laughs, “I’ve been married for years, I wear my sing everywhere I go, but I still get approached by men. Does your father cry because it happens? No, he knows that I love and respect him.”

“Now let it sink in, even if not her babydaddy, men will want something from an attractive woman. Trust her and believe in yourself, unless given a reason to do otherwise,” Mnguni adds.

He blows out a heavy sigh and nods, “Okay, what are we eating?”

Masentle leaves the table and goes to the kitchen.

“Uyachatha?” Mnguni asks, looking at him.

He frowns, “Why are you asking me about douching?”

“Because it’s easy to keep a woman who’s emotionally taken care of and, sexually and financially satisfied,” Mnguni says.

“I try,” he sips water, not holding his father’s stare.

“Don’t try, make her happy,” – Mnguni. He says, pushing back his chair and following his wife to the kitchen.

It looks like he opened up to getting more pressure. Now he’s wondering if Nondu is happy with him and if she’d be kept even if

another option came. Or he'd just lose her,
a feeling he can't stomach.

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AUNT TEEKAY

Khulekani has a mystery side to him. He's someone with a lot of issues bottled up. She's always been an emotional support structure for her family, been the mediator, and that one person whom everyone comes to with their problems. But with Khulekani it looks like it's beyond her. She hasn't tried to make him open up, he goes out to hustle

in the mornings, God knows where, and comes back in the evenings to her. They haven't defined the relationship they have, for now they're just two people running away from their unpleasant realities.

They're in a rented one-bedroom house in KwaMashu, G-section. This has been his safe space since he became independent from his family.

He's late than usual today, he walks in wearing black boots, jeans and a bomber jacket. It's cold outside, he dumps the Nike back-pack on the bed and rushes to their two-plate stove to warm his hands.

Thembelihle pulls the backpack to her lap and opens it.

Her mouth drops open. It's not papers, this is real money.

"Khulekani!"

He turns, looks at her lap and shows no hint of emotion.

"Where did you get this money?" she asks.

He clears his throat, **"Driving, I got a taxi."**

"Taxi drivers don't get paid this much cash.

Did you rob a bank or something?" She has to know what she's being implicated into.

Even long-distance taxis don't make this much for owners.

"Rob a bank? Come on, what did you cook?" He's trying to change the subject.

He's trying the wrong person, she's not sleeping with the money she doesn't know

where it came from. “Speak, or I’m calling the police.”

“And saying what? It’s not a crime to have cash in a bag. Just so you know, I didn’t do anything illegal, I worked for the money to take care of you,” he says.

A deep breath! She needs to calm down; she closes the backpack and pushes it aside.

“Did you talk to your mother?” she asks.

He turns back to the stove, drags in a sharp breath.

“Yeah, he’s still there doing okay.” He hates keeping tabs on her past. She’s here with him, Delani should be the least of her concerns. He doesn’t know what they’re doing, but whatever it is, no third part is

needed. He's leveled her, they enjoy each other's company, she no longer thinks he's a young boy, one night changed all of that.

"I should contact my sister again," she says.

He doesn't respond. Whatever is it that they have, he doesn't want it to end before they figure it out. If she leaves, he will never know if he had a chance at happiness.

"I will dish up," Thembelihle says, blowing out a low sigh.

He steps aside for her to use the table. His eyes are on her back, he finds every part of her attractive. He stands closer, snakes his

arm around her waist and exhales heavily behind her.

“Are you hungry or not?” Thembelihle asks.

“I’m hungry,” he says, gently biting the back of her neck.

There are things he does to tame the lioness in her. Like breathing too close, she’s just a second away from turning around and giving him what he wants.

“Khulekani stop,” she sounds weak even to her own ears.

He grabs her neck, gently and slowly he turns her face to the side and locks his lips into hers the moment her face gets closer.

He’s had a long day, he just needs one round and everything will be okay. His past

sexual interests, he wouldn't call them neither hook-ups or girlfriends, they were younger than him. Thembelihle is a bit older, with a mentality that she's more matured, the coin spins differently this time.

He pulls her towards the bed, his arms tightly wrapped around her. He pushes her down and stands. He takes off the jacket and strips his T-shirt off.

He pecks her lips, one, two, three times.

“You really have no patience, I was going to be done in a minute.” She's just putting on a face, he knows how much she enjoys him.

“Will you shut up, bubbles?” He shuts her up with a kiss before she tells him how much she hates being call ‘bubbles’.

He lifts her dress up, he didn’t expect to find a tight. “You’re indoors,” he says, grunting with displeasure and pushing his fingers under the tight waist. With her help he manages to get it out.

“I missed you,” he says, finally getting his hand on the wet twat.

“While committing God knows what crimes?” She’s asking this to provoke him. She knows he keeps most shit to himself but this is one she’s not willing to let go without digging in deeper.

He makes no comment, he keeps his gaze on her and massages between her wet folds

with his fingers. She's wet and ready, but because she's stubborn he will stimulate her until she's on the verge of begging.

She's controlling her deep breaths, which makes them even more uneven.

She holds back for a minute, then she gives in.

"Take the jeans off," she says.

He hides his smile by shoving his face down and smooching the side of her neck.

Her hands reach to the zipper of his jeans and undo it.

He lifts his torso, allows her to push his jeans below his butt. Then he stands and pushes everything down to his ankles. His pego is girthy and popping a vein. When in bed they have a crazy chemistry, she

doesn't hold much back during the deed. He loves her for that. When he pulls her legs up, she grabs his face and onslaughts him with a passionate kiss.

He rubs her clit, then down to her opening, she's warm.

"Damn!" he drops his forehead to her as she welcomes him into her juicy castle.

He can't ask for a better person to do this with. Precious moments, special connection, and enigmatic relationship.

They're moving in a rhythm, she's meeting his strokes from beneath. He's moaning, getting deeper with each stroke, right next to her ear.

Her nails dig into his skin. He's doing something right, he has to be consistent.

“Khule!” she screams.

He feels her become wetter, the next stroke misses; he slips out.

He kisses her forehead, and gets off to grab a towel to wipe her.

“You dripped too hard,” he smiles, slowly pushing the tip in again.

The bolting pleasure runs through his veins again. He yammers, pushing further into her juicy core. This is something he can never let go; he needs to mark his territory before Delani reminds her of what they had in the past.

His warm jism fills her up, he’s whimpering like he’s on the verge of tears. He stays inside her, calming his breaths. Then he

pulls out his now soft pego and lies next to her.

She takes the towel and wipes herself before him.

After dressing up she washes her hands and opens the window. If it wasn't so cold she would've helped out the smell with a fan. But it's only the two of them anyway, this is their smell, she goes on to continue with dishing.

She's never lived with a man for weeks. In her whole life she's never seen herself as a submissive girlfriend, or whatever she is here. She surprises herself when she cooks and does both their laundry without feeling some kind of way.

He's still lying on the bed, she pulls the plastic chair and puts his plate on it.

"Are you going to sit up?" she asks.

He drags a deep breath and sits up.

"Thank you," he's thanking her for both the food and a good round.

They eat in silence, things are sometimes awkward after sex because their relationship has no label yet. He doesn't know how to crack a conversation, she's the loudmouth of the house, it's awkward if she's quiet.

"Thembelihle, I know you have, or rather had a life planned somewhere else, with another person. And in a real sense I'm not in a position to ask someone to be in my life, at the moment I have nothing to offer,

no stability or whatsoever.” He takes a brief pause, he’s losing his words, he wanted to get straight to the point. “I know I don’t have a happy face, but trust me I’ve been happy ever since we arrived here. Not that I don’t want you to go back to your family, I’m sure they miss you, but I don’t want this to end. This is the closest I’ve ever been to the purpose of life.”

It’s good to hear him appreciating her presence. This is the first he’s said so much and opened up about his feelings like this. Only if he’d open up more and hides nothing from her.

“Is this for keeping this thing going?” she asks, looking at the backpack.

He nods with hesitation; he didn't tell her the whole truth about the money.

“How did you get it?” she asks.

“It's a business, not illegal, but not legit either. I just want to have a start, I'm close to the target, please allow me to close a few deals then I will stop.” He's begging, if he wasn't desperate to make her stay comfortably he wouldn't do any of this. It's only for a short period of time, until he gets the money he needs.

“Do I need to help?” she asks.

He almost drops the spoon. This is not a reaction he expected given how persistent she's been with questioning him.

“No bubbles, you help by staying here and keeping your legs closed until I open them.”

Her eyes widen.

Did he say something wrong?

“Don’t ever say that again,” she says, with a serious face.

“Okay,” he puts his hands up.

He doesn’t understand why that’s offensive to her, but never again, he’s been cautioned.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 49

NONDUMEZULU

It's my last session with Dr Khan, I've learnt quite a lot about myself, for that I'm grateful Dr Manzini judged me and sent me here. I know my strengths and my weaknesses, I know what has been the biggest challenges for me in terms of my personal relationship with self. I have worked on my self-esteem, I see life on a different light.

She's looking at me from across the table, I think the smile on her face means I did well.

“Do you have any questions?” she asks.

Do I? Maybe I do, they just don't concern the journey her and I had.

"It's kind of a personal question," I say.

She chuckles, "Go ahead and ask, we still have 5 minutes."

"You're married, I assume you've been with your husband for quite a time. Did you fight constantly when you were dating?" I ask.

"Your definition of constantly is how many times in a week?" -

"Like being cool today and fighting tomorrow, in that order," I say.

"Fighting about what?" Her look tells me this is not normal.

“I’m in a relationship with a person who was hurt a lot in the past, mainly by his family. I love him, he loves me. But due to my relationship with the father of my child, I’m not emotionally available as much as he’d want me to be. The things he complains about, I really don’t care about. And sometimes I feel like he uses the fact I know his background, then he just plays on that to mess with my emotions.” I didn’t come here planning to say all of this. It’s just coming up, I’ve never talked about it with anyone, I didn’t even confront these feelings on my own.

“So he emotionally blackmail you?” she asks.

I nod, “At times, yes he does.”

“Do you think he’d have to do that if maybe you were emotionally available?”

“I’m not closed off completely, I just don’t care to be babied in a relationship, on the other hand that’s what he wants. He wants to be reminded that he’s loved every second of the day, I have to put him on the front row seat of my mind wherever I am, if that’s not the case he goes to lengths to mess with my emotions so that I can see how hurt he is,” I say.

“How does that make you feel?” she asks.

I release a low sigh, laying back on the chair.

“Emotionally drained,” I say.

“I think you will be emotionally drained and he will continue to do whatever he can

to get your attention. You are both still dealing with the wounds from your past; he needs you to baby him because of his past challenges with his family, you mentioned that. And you're carrying the pain from your relationship with the father of your son. You don't want to be vulnerable, which is both good and bad, especially when you're with someone."

"What must I do?" I ask

She's an expert of life, she went to school to study solving people's problems.

"Confront your past, be honest with him and make him aware of how you feel.

Nothing beats open communication in a relationship, even the constant fighting will

stop once you've established healthy communication strategies," she says.

She was helpful, I'm glad she didn't chase me out, Dr Manzini didn't sign me up for my relationship problems.

"Thank you very much, I will put your advice to good use," I say.

She smiles, "You're welcome, I'm glad you and I worked so well."

"Wish me good luck with Dr Manzini," I'm just saying, I know it's totally up to what she's going to write to him in the report.

But I'm very confident in my new studied behavior, I'm now a very positive person, I know how to think before opening my mouth.

She talked about me confronting my past, which is Solwazi. Nobody has put me in pain like that man, I was very young, he took advantage of me and decided to dump me with a pregnancy. I kept Nzuzo against all odds, he didn't show any remorse, not even when I bumped into him at KFC. I want to see him and his wife, I want to know why he rejected the pregnancy and why he wants Nzuzo now. I'm tired of hating him, I want to gracefully move on and heal from his rejection and pain.

I unblock Samantha, the wife. I don't want to just communicate with her husband, I don't respect that piece of shit but I respect the fact that he's married.

Her phone rings a couple of time before he answers,

“Mrs Samantha Dlomo, hello.”

Is this how every married woman answers?

“It’s Nzuzo’s mom, can we talk?” I ask.

“Oh, finally!” She doesn’t say I’ve come to my senses but I know that’s what she wanted to say.

There’s a shifting movement in her background, then she comes back to the line.

“We can talk, my husband is here, you’re on loudspeaker,” she says.

I can’t help but roll my eyes.

“I want to see him, you can come too,” I tell her.

“Is it about Nzuzo?” she asks.

“No, it’s about me,” I say.

I know that won’t sound appropriate, but she married that man knowing his sins.

“About you and my husband?” she asks.

“Yep, about us,” I say.

She laughs, it’s a mocking one.

I hear Solwazi clearing his throat, then he asks,

“Can’t we talk about it over the phone?”

“No, you didn’t impregnate me over the phone, and you surely didn’t reject Nzuzo over the phone. When we met at KFC you didn’t belittle him over the phone. The clothes you bought, you didn’t send over

the phone. So hell yes Solwazi, we can't talk about it over the phone."

The wife grabs the phone from him.

"When and at what time?" she asks, infuriated.

"Tomorrow, I will confirm the time and send you just now."

I drop the call and make another one, to Nkalipho.

I don't want to go without him, lest he goes to bed without eating like when I came from the hospital with Dr Manzini.

"Hey sthandwa sami," he answers.

"Babe, how busy are you tomorrow?"

"I'm a bit busy, not that much," he says.

“I want to meet with Solwazi and his wife, I cannot close that chapter of my life without confronting him,” I say.

“You have a child with him, so how would you close the chapter? He calls and texts you.”

“I no longer have the space in my heart to hate him, I don’t want him to be a man that hurt me and what-what, I think it affects you and I as well that I’m so clung on what he did to me. Whenever I hear of his name I get angry, I don’t have time for that anymore,” I say.

“Okay I hear you, so you want me to drive you?” he asks.

“No, I want you to come with me. Just tell me when you’re free then I will tell his wife,” I say.

“Wow, I didn’t expect that. Umh, let’s say 11h00, I will make time,” he says.

“Thank you babe, love you!” I drop the call and text Samantha the time and location.

Before I allow Nzuzo to call him baba, Solwazi needs to hear from me.

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I know Nkalipho went to work in the morning, so to avoid making him drive here to fetch me I decided to take taxis. I’m in

hometown by 9am, I'm just window-shopping because going home and coming back here will be time-consuming, I'd rather go home after I'm done with the meeting.

I didn't even dress up, I have nothing to prove to Solwazi and his wife about my life. I'm wearing jeans and All-Star shoes. I combed my hair up and tied a top bun. I'm just looking simple, no make-up, no jewelries.

Nkalipho calls, he's just leaving work.

"I'm in the mall babe," I say.

"Oh okay, I thought you were waiting for me to fetch you. I will be there in 15 minutes, please order me something to eat, I'm hungry," he says.

“Okay, you will find me at McDonald’s then, we will come back to the mall around 11.”

“Okay, love you!” he drops the call.

It’s so weird seeing my ex-colleagues and not being at work. They’re all happy for me, some that I talk with on Facebook always wish me good luck. I go to McDonald’s and order beef burgers and chips, and drinks. My eyes are on the time, the Dlomos haven’t communicated all morning, but they haven’t canceled either, so I believe they’re coming.

Nkalipho arrives 5 minutes earlier than I expected, he’s in his work uniform.

He hugs and kisses my cheek, then sits.

“Why do you always wear this uniform because you don’t lift a spade?” I ask.

“To market the company wherever I go,” he says.

I’ve never thought of that, I love him in the uniform though, he’s never dirty. He gives hardworking man vibes and still maintain the sexiness.

“Have you talked to them?” he asks.

“No, but they haven’t canceled, so I believe they’re coming,” I say.

He nods and digs into his meal. I haven’t eaten yet, my appetite will come once I’ve given the couple my piece of mind. From how she spoke to me when she called me the first time, I know Samantha and I can never be friends.

11:48, my phone rings.

Yep, they're almost an hour late and I took my boyfriend out of work to grace them with his presence. It's Samantha asking if I'm still here, they just got here. They have busier lives than both Nkalipho and I. I cannot relate, I don't have multiple businesses and a soccer team that never wins.

Okay, I'm not going to be jealous, Samantha is beautiful. She looks very classy from a distance and she's a fashion goddess, her presence commands attention.

Solwazi looks good as well. He hides his rotten character well in that suit.

They make their orders first before proceeding to our table. Nkalipho is done eating, I think I will have mine as a take-away.

Samantha greets, she sounds different in person.

Nkalipho is suddenly tense besides me. His eyes are dropped, he's not looking at them. If Nkalipho drops his eyes it's either he's angry or feeling insecure for a minute. It was necessary that he comes here with me, he's been a huge part of Nzuzo's life.

Solwazi sits, he doesn't look too happy.

"I didn't know there'd be a third person," he says.

He hasn't greeted us and the first thing he does is to fail Maths.

“Are you talking about Nkalipho? He’s the fourth person, not third,” I say.

He’s clenching his jaws, glaring at Nkalipho’s direction.

“I thought you said you have something to say to me. I’m surprised to see another person that I didn’t sleep with,” he’s pushing it.

I didn’t bring Nkalipho here to be provoked, I haven’t figured why he’s dropped his eyes.

“Your wife is here,” I say.

“She’s my wife, you’re saying it. Who is this?”

Okay, we are not here to argue about who I brought. He’s not going to spin this and make it about Nkalipho.

“Ask your son, he knows who this is,” I hit right on the nerve.

He’s under the impression that Nzuzo doesn’t know him. I can see the twinge of pain in his eyes, I won’t lie it makes me so happy.

Samantha takes her drink from the waiter and passes one to Solwazi.

“Why are we here?” she asks, lifting her drawn eyebrows.

I don’t waste time, I start with the questions.

“What made you change your mind about Nzuzo?” I ask Solwazi.

“I grew up,” he’s spitting bullshit.

“You were never young, I was. Tell me something else, if you want to lie at least be creative,” I say.

“Can we leave the past to the past?” He’s very quick to dismiss me.

“No, we can’t,” I say.

Samantha bats her long eyelashes, looking at him.

Then she turns her eyes to me, “What he means is that he made an immature decisions, he’s grown now and he wants to rewrite his wrongs.”

“Samantha, right?” I know her name very well, I’m just irritated.

She nods, “Yes, Samantha.”

“Okay Samantha, please don’t insert yourself, you are not a tampon.”

Nkalipho looks at me and frowns. I forgot to tell him that I’m not going to be nice at all.

“Yet you asked for me to be here,” – Samantha says.

“Because I wanted you to keep an eye on your husband. I don’t want any accusations, I just want him to tell me why he wants my son in his life out of the blue. He clearly wanted to be a father, just not my son’s father. Now what has changed?” I say.

“I’ve never not wanted to be his father,” Solwazi says.

I laugh, he’s such a funny idiot.

“Then why are we here if that’s the case?” I ask.

“Because I fucked up. I knew that he was my son, I thought about him everyday, but something just blocked me from accepting him in my heart,” he says.

He makes it sounds almost believable, except that it’s a bunch of nonsense.

“What has unblocked that thing now?” I ask.

“After I bumped into you and him, and handled him the way I did, I really suffered.”

Okay, I don’t know what I expected to hear but this is not it.

“In what way?” I ask.

Instead of answering he's fighting back tears. His wife is comforting him, I definitely didn't come here to watch him cry because he suffered for a month or whatever short time. I have suffered for 8 years and I'm not crying.

"I'm sorry Nondu, I have no excuse, I know I owe you an explanation but I don't have any, I don't know why I did what I did," he says in a breaking voice.

His wife is actually a human, I thought she was one of those who are in it for the money. There's love between them, it looks genuine.

"When is your uncle coming to see my mother?" I ask.

He heaves a deep sigh, buries his face and shakes his head.

If he's seeking sympathy from me, then he can forget it.

Samantha speaks for him, "They're happy to see his life falling apart. You know what they say; when days are dark friends are few."

Oh, the family doesn't want him now.

"Then how do you plan to do things?" I ask her.

"I can come and stand for him," she says.

She's too ambitious, she's not a Dlomo by blood.

"No, I want things done appropriately," I say.

Her husband finally looks up. Nkalipho has lifted his eyes too, he's leaning back on the chair with his arms folded. I think there's a beef here, it must be about the clothes and disrespect Solwazi showed him when they met.

"I will sort it out," he says.

"We will see," I pick my drink and sip.

I don't trust a word he's saying.

I nudge Nkalipho with an elbow, "Do you want to say anything?"

He doesn't even open his mouth, he just shakes his head.

"My man has to go back to work, thanks for coming," I say standing up. They actually came here to say nothing, just to cry me a river.

Nkalipho stands too, he shoves his phone in his pocket and takes my hand.

“Nondu,” – Solwazi.

We both turn and look back at him.

“I love my son. Yes I made mistakes, but he’s my blood. Don’t lie to him, it will complicate his life, he’s a special child,” he says.

Now he knows that Nzuzo is special?

Wonders shall never end.

Nkalipho takes my hand, he wants us to leave.

I can’t believe how much control he’s able to exercise in there.

“I’m sorry I put you in the middle of that situation,” I say, we are making our way out.

“It’s fine, I have to talk to you about something,” he says.

“Me too,” I say.

How coincidental!

We both laugh, I guess what he wants to talk about is not bad, just like what I want to talk to him about.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 50

NONDUMEZULU

Honestly, I only wanted to brief Nkalipho about what Dr Khan and I talked about regarding communication in this relationship. I would've done it in a minute but he's taken it way too big that we are now sitting at the empty oceans. It's refreshing though, I partly understand why he wanted us to come and talk here. The sea breeze adds some peace, I mean anyone who fight at the beach got some serious mental issues.

“Thank you for today,” he says randomly.

“What did I do?” I'm confused.

“By including me to your meeting with Solwazi. It means a lot to me. I didn't say

anything but I was feeling some kind of way about him, especially about how he came off when he decided to introduce himself to Nzuzo while he was with me. I know he doesn't see me at all," he says.

I know this man very well now, I knew he was angry at that table with Solwazi. He just controlled himself to respect me, I'm happy he didn't give Solwazi a second of his attention. I mean, Solwazi was coming at him from the sides, completely undermining him.

"I hate competition," he says with a low chuckle.

I don't know what he means by that, there'd never be a reason for him to

compete with anyone, especially Solwazi.

So I keep quiet, he's playing with the sand.

He release a deep exhalation, then looks at me and cracks a thin smile.

"Maybe it's because I'm insecure," he says.

One thing I appreciate about him is that he never lies to himself, he does everything knowing exactly what it is. And his insecurities mostly is what comes between us.

"Why are you insecure? I mean, what reasons have I given you for you not to fully trust me and think I might leave you at any day?"

He shrugs, "I don't know."

"Okay, do I not love you enough?" I ask.

He takes a moment before he answers this one. I'm eager to know.

"It's probably the insecurities talking, but I feel like you can live without me Nondu. I always get that from you and it scares me," he says.

"Wouldn't you live without me?" I ask.

"No," he says without any hesitation.

It's not a normal way of thinking but I understand because it's him. Love is love, you can say those things romantically, but to actually not see yourself breathing without another individual is not a good thing.

"I'm not going to leave you, you know that, right?" I ask.

He looks at me, smiles and then shakes his head.

“Well, now you know, I’m going to be more open about my emotions. Hopefully you will stop playing with me then,” I say.

He gives me an innocent look; “I never play with you,” he says.

“Come on Nkalipho, you always do when we fight. That drains me emotionally, please don’t do it. You know your past hurts me as much as it hurts you, you’re my man and I love you, don’t do things to make me feel horrible about myself just so I ask for forgiveness even when I’m not wrong.”

He holds my hand, rubbing sand particles against me. I look up from his shoulder, our

eyes lock. I can see his heart in his eyes, he's wearing all his emotions.

"I'm sorry," he says.

His apology sounds genuine. But I know I will have to help him to stop doing that.

"I will give you the attention when you need it so that you don't pull stunts seeking it."

He laughs, "You make me sound like a needy baby."

"Aren't you one though?" I lay my head on his shoulder, I'm glad we had this conversation without pointing fingers and shifting the blame back and forth. There's some growth in both of us.

"So you wanted to talk to me about Solwazi?" I ask.

“No, not really,” he says and drags in a deep breath.

So there’s more. I don’t push, I just lean on him brushing his arm and looking at the ocean.

He clears his throat after a moment and asks, “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Nondu,” he gently pushes me off.

He creates some space between us and then looks at me in the eyes.

“Remember what I said when we started going out, if I ever do anything you don’t like or want me to improve at, just let me know,” he says.

I nod, I remember that.

“So do I make you happy? In everything and every way possible.”

“Beside what we just talked about?” I ask.

“Yes, besides what you’ve already told me,” he says, eagerly staring at me.

“I am happy,” I nod.

“Financial support?”

I laugh, I will always find it weird that he thinks I’m entitled to his financial help.

“You try,” I say with a slight shrug.

He throws back his head and laughs.

“What does that mean?” he asks.

“I’m just kidding babe, don’t ever feel cornered to help me financially, do what you’re comfortable with. I think it would be selfish of me not to acknowledge the time

you always take off to get me into places and the money you've spent helping me move out and sending the 'girlfriend allowance' to help me take care of the bills," I say.

He's smiling, it's so genuine and adorable.

Then he heaves another deep breath, he's looking serious again.

"And sex, are you happy in the bedroom?"

"Yes," I say and just burst out laughing.

I mean, what kind of a question is this now, I thought we were talking about the serious stuff.

"Personally I enjoy every moment with you, there are some recent things here and there but I'm still happy," he says.

Okay, insecurities don't even knock, they just take over.

"What recent things?" I ask.

He chuckles shyly and shifts closer.

I'm not smiling, I want to know what things. I always make him cum, unlike him I've never satisfied only myself and then slept.

"Remember I keep telling you to eat a bit healthy and cut off the acids and oily stuff a bit."

"Yeah," – my response is already aggressive.

"Sometimes you become abnormally wet and slippery," he says.

That's some bullshit!

“So you want to fuck me dry?” I ask.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I mean it...let’s just not talk about it. The question was about you, I have nothing to complain about, really.”

“I don’t have anything to say.” I’m so tense, I face the ocean and breathe in.

“But we were talking about commutation not so long ago. It’s just the two of us here, why can’t we openly talk about everything? I love you Nondu, please don’t fight with me today.”

Communication! That was the whole point of me asking to talk with him. I just didn’t expect him to involve my vagina and talk badly about it.

“You’re embarrassing me,” I say, turning my attention back to him.

“To who, my love? I’m just asking you to stop drinking energy drinks 20 times a day and eating every junk you come across,” he says.

I’m still offended, even by that. I won't say I've been eating healthy, but who the fuck is he.

“Because my vagina will be extra wet and slippery for your dick that cums in two minutes?” I ask.

I didn’t expect him to laugh, he laughs until I question my own sanity.

“I take longer now because it’s no longer gripping,” he says.

I jump on the motherfucker. I push him on his back and sit on his chest. He fights my hands off his face, still laughing like a hyena.

“You have never taken longer,” I say, trying to get my hands on his neck.

“I do, how long did I take after I brought Nzuzo home, in the car?”

“I didn’t even cum, are you kidding me?”

“That wasn’t my fault, I didn’t tell you to think about Lotto numbers while being fucked.” I don’t know he flips me over and puts me in the bottom. He’s staring down at me with his hands on either side of my face.

“It’s never going to be always perfect. I’m happy Nondu, with everything to be

honest. But that doesn't mean don't take my advice," he says and smiles.

I didn't know it was this unpleasant getting a bad sex review from your partner.

"Okay, you also go and administer the enema into your butthole," I tell him.

"Then something is going to grow in here," he touches my tummy.

He knows how I feel about pregnancy, he's freaking me out.

"Mnguni is always asking me about grandchildren. When do you think we are going to start planning things like that?"

He's looking at me, playing with the baby hair on my forehead. Mnguni is putting unnecessary pressure on him.

"At least two years or so," I say.

“What about marriage? Would that disturb your life too?” he asks.

How did we get this deep so suddenly?

“Let’s give it time, we are still young and learning. There’s so much that I need to enjoy from you as a boyfriend, I don’t want you to become my family member, someone on my emergency contacts. No, I want the joy of jumping in the bathroom when you accidentally burst the condom.”

He laughs and buries his face on my chest. I feel his dick against me, it’s not hard but it’s definitely not lying like a rotten banana either. Now I’m thinking why I’ve never been fucked at the beach.....

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

It's been a week since she attended Zothani's funeral, her and Salo didn't exchange any words but nevertheless she calls her brother everyday and asks how she's doing since she's at the Khumalos. That child is dramatic, she really thinks Zothani was killed. How's that even possible? Yes, she didn't want Salo to fall pregnant and if she had the chance she would've killed that baby. Not the father though, it never crossed her mind. If she didn't want her in the picture she would've easily removed him, just like any other

boyfriend of hers in the past. She has the best schitho, something that makes a man run and never look back. It just didn't work for her with Njomane's bitches.

Speaking of that deceased, it's long overdue now, if he was alive he would've come back hearing that his princess lost the father of her child. He's dead, maybe he was eaten by crocodiles or something.

What she needs to do right now is to send invites for the memorial service and then organize a dignified send-off.

She will call Sbonga, Sbonga will pass the message to her brother since that brat has chosen not to speak to her. Her brother will force Salo to come, he's always on her side.

MaNkosi doesn't have to know in advance, because what is she ever busy with? Her life isn't that serious.

Luckily she has some money she was saving from Salo's monthly contributions. She also knows where Njomane kept the money he got from his brother's insurances. It's all going towards the memorial service and funeral. She took some notes from Zothani's funeral, she needs to raise the standard .

Sbonga answers, "Hello Mom."

Why did she choose Salo to be her favorite child? Sbonga should've been the one she looks out for the most. What a sweet child!

"Hey nana, I just want to tell you that I'm so sorry about your father," she says.

“What happened to him?” Sbonga freaks out.

“I think he really died, askies nana. You have to come home with your brother, I will send the money tomorrow, Wednesday I’m doing a memorial service for him,” she says.

Sbonga starts crying, “But you said he was going to come back.”

“I know my child, I’m so sorry,” she starts crying too.

It’s so sad that she’s going to bury two special people in a space of weeks. This has MaNkosi written all over it, MaNkosi wanted her to become a widow like her.

Oh flip, it was her who bewitched Njomane. But what if it’s MaNkosi who made her

want to kill Njomane because she wanted him all to her sister? In fact why is nobody looking at this from that angle? Okay, here is the plan, on the day of the memorial service a sangoma will come over. She wants to get the best one, someone who trained under the river and had sex with the big snakes in there, that's how the truth is going to come out. Salo will regret leaving home and falsely accusing her, MaNkosi will stop hiding behind the Bible. She makes all the necessary calls and informs everyone who is important, MaNkosi will find out in the morning of the memorial service.

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Sekhona, the drama prince, arrived at MaNkosi's house. Now it's clear that MaNkosi has always wanted her life. MaNkosi wants everything she has, even her son. She's now turning Sekhona against her because she wants him all to herself. She wouldn't be surprised if MaNkosi changes her name to Busisekile at this point. By the way she's failed to turn Sbonga against her; her beautiful baby is here.

"Did you get your stokvel food?" Sbonga asks in amazement. She's standing in the kitchen looking at the piles of groceries.

"No, I bought that cash," she says.

“For the bodyless funeral? Do you realize that Salo might actually not continue supporting you. If you spend all the money you have what are you going to live on?” - Sbonga.

This child overthinks and fails to see the bigger picture.

“Your father’s insurances will pay out,” she confidently says.

Sbonga sighs, “If you say so. Can I open the bottle of mayonnaise?”

“Obviously, I bought 3 bottles, feel free.”

Sbonga dishes up for both of them. It’s just the two of them, Sekhona decided to go to MaNkosi’s house and everyone else will arrive in the morning.

They sit in front of the TV and eat.

“Did I tell you that I called a sangoma and asked her to come over tomorrow in the memorial service?” – Busisekile.

Sbonga frowns, “To do what?”

“To throw bones and tell everyone who killed my husband,” she says.

Sbonga’s face drops in disappointment.

“But it was you mom, you confessed to Salo,” she says.

“Yes, but someone bewitched me to bewitch my husband. It didn’t just happen, your father and I loved each other, it’s someone who had a very good reason to want us apart,” Busisekile says, almost convincing.

But Sbonga still doesn't think it's a good idea. She's suggested it once, her mother needs some mental assistance, she hasn't been normal for a while. Only if Salo could listen.

"Mom, my friends from school are coming to support me. If the sangoma comes here and says it's you who did everything, I will trend, I'm a troll at school," she says.

"Don't worry, your position as the school's troll won't be affected. It's someone else who will be embarrassed tomorrow, I want it to trend all over Mandeni; The People's Husbands' Killer Busted." That could be a good headline, she looks at Sbonga, "Do you know any journalist around here who can cover the service and write about it?"

"Mom, no!"

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 51

SALO MHLONGO

I'm here because my uncle asked me to and actually came with me, and the fact that this concerns my father. I don't know what gives my mother the right to do a memorial service for someone who hasn't been declared dead. Sekhona and I are definitely against it, but she's erected a huge tent and

invited a bunch of people, neighbors are all here, there's nothing we can do to cancel this. Sbonga seems to be undecided when it comes to cutting the woman off, I don't know whether she's scared to be without a mother or she doesn't believe that she's capable of doing the things I accused her of doing.

I don't know where she got the money, there's a catering team and full decoration inside the tent. I was given an early maternity leave at work, it's a fully paid leave. But I will never, ever, spend a cent on MaKhumalo. I will continue to take care of my siblings because they're not innocent, if my father ever decides to come back I will continue being a daughter to her, but MaKhumalo is dead to me.

“I knew you’d come home,” she says to me, smiling.

I only respond to her because the room is full of people.

“Did you bring an outfit to wear?” she asks.

I look at myself, am I naked?

“Huh, ah Salabenzi. Today is about your father, you can’t look anyhow. Please borrow something from Sbonga and look decent,” she says.

There’s a sangoma sitting on the couch eating. I didn’t know we were friends with zangomas. I hate that everyone is looking at me with sympathy. I know they couldn’t wait to see me, poor girl who lost the babydaddy while pregnant. I leave under the disguise of searching for Sbonga, I just

want to get away from the stares, I'm not changing my outfit.

I'm going to MaNkosi's house, they're all not here yet.

"Are you going to MaNkosi's house," that's MaKhumalo.

She's everywhere, seeing everything.

"Yeah," I say.

"Okay, tell her she must come, I'm hosting your father's memorial service."

Hosting? Is it a party?

I don't know why MaNkosi has to be told now. I hope this woman didn't skip her and tell everyone else because that would be weird and sneaky.

I cross the road and go to MaNkosi's house. It's actually very quiet in the yard, you can't even hear Nzuzo playing or famously crying for no reason.

I knock at the door, they're inside because the TV is playing.

After a minute Nzuzo opens the door. Is it my eyes or kids normally look grown everytime you see them? I attempt to lift him up but with his weight and my stomach, it's impossible. I end up giving her a hug and pulling his hand.

"You're here to see mkhulu?" he asks.

He's a child, you ask for clarity when he speaks.

"Which mkhulu?" I ask.

"Babo," he says.

I like it when he calls people what his mother calls them. Sometimes he puts her in trouble and calls people the names they hate.

“No, mkhulu is overseas,” I say just a simple lie to get him to stop talking about him. I’m still dealing with another loss, my mother didn’t consider how hard this would be to me.

“No, you’re lying,” Nzuzo says.

I look at him with disbelief. Did he just call me a liar without even sugarcoating it?

“Nzuzo, I’m your elder, you can’t say I’m lying,” I call him out.

He looks up at me, batting her eyelashes.

“You’re lying,” he repeats.

My goodness!

MaNkosi was hearing him, she yells from the lounge.

“That’s your aunt Nzuzo!”

Still, Nzuzo doesn’t care, he runs in front of me and disappears. I can’t help but laugh, he’s cute, he can get away with anything.

MaNkosi is actually knitting, it doesn’t look like she plans going anywhere.

I greet and sit on the couch, confused.

“Where is Nondu?” I ask.

“She’s in Shakaskraal,” she says.

I’m disappointed, unlike Sbonga, Nondu is not afraid to choose a side. I just feel alone.

“MaKhumalo didn’t inform you guys about the memorial service, right?”

“No, I heard about it on the streets,” she says.

Why am I surprised about this? It’s what MaKhumalo would do, she lives to make people miserable or look miserable.

“Well, she asked me to tell you to come over. It’s bullshit, you don’t have to go,” I’m angry.

She looks at me, eyes widen.

“What kind of language is that Sally?”

Really, she wants to reprimand me.

“I’m saying don’t go there, she’s undermining you, don’t leave your knitting for her,” I say.

“It’s not about her, if Njomane is really no more then I have to be there on behalf of his brother. Whether your mother likes me or not, they were brothers,” she says.

Give this woman her award! I don’t know where she buys her chill pills from, they’re very effective. She’s always unbothered, nothing ever get under her skin.

I wait for her as she goes to change her dress and Nzuzo. Things are getting a bit serious, I don’t know how I’m going to lock my brain and not hear them talking about my father in the past tense. I’m in my uncle’s house because I’m running away from anything that reminds me that Zothani is no more. I send messages to his phone every morning, I call and leave voice

messages. That's how I'm dealing with his death, by pretending he's still alive just not physically with me.

I send Nondu a grieving text;

**WHERE ARE YOU WHEN I NEED YOU
THE MOST?**

She calls me immediately.

“Hey are you okay?” Her question triggers the emotions I've been burying.

“No,” my voice trembles but I manage to hold back tears.

“I heard about the memorial service and called my mother, she said your mother told everyone about it but her. I didn't want to come there and intrude,” she says.

“I know, I just feel so alone, I thought you’d be here,” I say.

“He’s not dead, none of us have felt it. Let her do her thing and achieve whatever she wants to achieve,” she says.

“Okay, I’m sorry I sent that message and kind of emotionally blackmailed you to call. I know you’re busy,” I’m actually not even mad at her, I misdirected my anger.

“I’m here, anytime, don’t even feel bad about needing a little comfort every now and then.”

“Thank you,” I say.

She wishes me luck before dropping the call.

I still have family, regardless of what MaKhumalo has done.

People are already in the tent singing when MaNkosi, Nzuzo and I arrive. Sbonga emerges from the tent and pulls me aside.

“Your in-laws are here,” she tells me.

“Huh? Who told them?” I didn’t expect them, especially the parents because they’re still in grief and they’re constantly not well, health-wise.

“Mom did,” she says.

I should’ve known, she’s doing this to be seen, nothing else.

I spot Nkatha and Nokwanda walking inside the tent. This is the support I didn’t expect, Mam’ Zungu is not here but her husband is. I’m feeling some strength, I’m

not so alone after all. Something, a very bright light, flashes on my face.

“Who’s that?” I ask Sbonga, shielding my face.

“A journalist from some local newspaper,” she says.

Okay, this is some kind of a joke. I’m not going to be taken pictures of while I’m mourning.

Before I can grab the guy and tell him to collect his equipment and go, my mother makes a grand entrance. My uncle turns into a fool when he’s around her as well, I mean what is he walking beside her for, holding her hand?

Before she sits, she release one single widow scream.

People express their sympathy by starting a song. Sekhona is leaning by the tent pole, I know if he was older none of this would've happened. Out of all men in this family, I think he will be the one to put an end to all the nonsense.

I don't know the fine-looking man directing the program. He looks natural behind the mic, something tells me it's one of those MCs you pay money for. MaKhumalo will get the surprise of her life when bank notifications don't roll into her phone month-end. She better pray the insurances pay her without the death certificate. Only God knows how she's going to pull that off.

Neighbors actually speak well of my father. Shange is here on behalf of friends, he looks grief-stricken than everyone here.

Obviously Sbonga is the voice of the children, neither Sekhona nor me could've stood there and made everything sound so perfect about this family.

A lot of other people stand to speak, including MaNkosi. God bless that woman, she knows how to hide disgraces of her family. When she speaks you'd swear her and MaKhumalo are the best sisterwives who are always there for each other.

“Now let's welcome Mrs Mhlongo, the deceased's beloved wife,” the program director says.

I didn't expect that one, she's supposed to be sitting with a blanket on her shoulders doing nothing. But there she is, in front of everyone starting the song out of tune.

People stand and sing along.

I can't even look at the Zungus' side, this is a circus.

She takes the black scarf off her shoulders before speaking in the memory of the husband she supposedly loved with every part of her.

“Njomane and I fought, but we always made up. The day before he disappeared we were busy planning our anniversary wedding. I don't know which ears that fell into, but it was definitely the wrong ears

because the next day he was gone,” she throws a look at where MaNkosi is.

No, she wouldn't dare! I move from the back and stand where she can see me. We are not going to throw accusations around, I know who the witch is.

“But my beloved community, I'm going to get to the bottom of what happened to my husband. Not tomorrow, not next week, and not in 2025, but today,” she vows.

There's a loud groan coming from the tent entrance. Everyone's attention turn to the woman walking in with a lid burning with impepho. It's the same woman I saw on the couch eating a plate of scones with her own 2l of Coke standing next to her.

“Nangu umpelandaba!” – MaKhumalo says, pointing at her.

The woman takes down my father’s picture and kneels with it. She unhooks her dirty bag and lays her things on the ground.

People are on their feet, the journalist is taking a thousand pictures, some people are videotaping with their phones.

Sbonga stands next to me, “I tried to stop her.”

“You knew about this?” Wtf is wrong with these people. Umhlahlo during the memorial service, really fam.

Everything has stopped, the sangoma is throwing bones and screaming something nobody can make sense of. I’m not sure

what's more annoying between the journalist and the people who are making live videos.

The sangoma stands, she's stomping her feet on the ground and the groaning like a wild animal.

“Ungcolile umfazi, this woman is dirty!” she says.

“Makhosi!” MaKhumalo's voice rises above everyone's.

“She wanted him dead, she planned it for a very long time,” the sangoma adds.

This time MaKhumalo cries like she just discovered the news. The sangoma kneels again, she shoves her head to the ground.

Some women are comforting my mother, she's still crying.

“Inkemba emshayile iselawini,” the sangoma says. Basically the weapon was formed in my father’s bedroom, everybody is shocked and confused.

“Oh fuck, I’m going to trend,” Sbonga says before disappearing behind me.

How did this become about her? I’m so glad MaKhumalo decided to organize a party to tell people that she killed her own husband.

“Amakhehla athukuthele,” the sangoma says.

How can the ancestors be not angry with all this witchcraft being practiced in their space?

Then she stands, she goes straight to MaKhumalo. Everyone has figured by now

that she's the witch being talked about. Just when I thought she'd have some shame, she moves away and hides behind a few people. The sangoma is right behind her, she then stops and shoves the sangoma away.

"How dare you?" She's ready to fight.

The journalist she hired to cover every event that takes place is passionately doing his job.

"Turn the cameras off wena!" she turns and charges towards the journalist.

My uncle and Sekhona finally jump to the journalist and the sangoma's rescue. They hold her back, there are loud whispers everywhere. I don't move from where I'm standing, I watch as everything unfolds.

“Mkhulu is here!” the little voice yells.

Everything pause, we are looking at the entrance again.

It’s Nzuzo standing there and yelling.

He repeats what he said, “Mkhulu is here.”

My father appears, he’s wearing a hat. He takes it off and looks around.

It takes me a minute, then I see Sekhona and Sbonga grabbing both his arms.

They’re hugging him, it’s really my dad. I go to his arms crying. I knew it, my dad was still alive.

He’s trying to hold all three of us,

MaKhumalo does the unthinkable and runs to him as well.

Sekhona stops her before I get my hands on her. She will never touch this man with her hands while I'm around.

“See this fake sangoma, you said he's dead, uThoko lo?” She's turning the whole thing against the sangoma she invited now. She wants to confuse the people.

“She wasn't lying,” I say, I don't care about the people.

“She came here, finished my scones, and then lied,” she keeps her act.

But I think she's too late, everyone is looking at her like she's mad.

The journalist, bless his lecturers, he's still doing his job.

I can't wait for the headlines tomorrow.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 52

SALO MHLONGO

People don't want to leave. I can't blame them for wanting to see how everything unfolds. At least MaKhumalo is quiet now. The police are here, they're talking with my father, I think she's a bit scared. She knows very well that the sangoma wasn't lying, she may have been incorrect about

Njomane being dead but everything else was true.

Nokwanda comes to me next to the tent. I'm such a horrible person, I completely forgot about them, I don't even know if they've had anything to drink.

"Are you okay?" she asks hugging me.

I'm not okay, I don't think I will ever be in this life.

But I give her a nod and a gentle smile.

"We are about to leave, Nkatha wants to talk to you," she says.

It will always be weird to me how she calls her father by name without thinking God is somewhere in Jerusalem noting it down in the big book of sins.

“What is it about?” I ask.

I’m still reserved when it comes to him.

Nothing has changed about his aura, even though he’s been trying to be supportive.

It’s like one has to watch themselves when they’re around him.

“I don’t know, maybe he just wants to hear how you’re doing,” Nokwanda says.

I find Sbonga first and ask her to get them drinks they can leave with. They all knew about the kind of family I come from, but still, I’m embarrassed about today.

I go with Nokwanda to the tent, they’re among the few people left inside. Nkatha stands and comes to us, leaving his father in the company of Shange.

He pulls one of the chairs. I'm sitting down for it, must be very serious.

He sits too, Nokwanda leaves.

I keep my eyes off him. He looks exactly like Zothani, one of the reasons why I wanted to heal far away from them. One day in the hospital I woke up from a nap and he was sitting next to the bed, for a moment I thought everything had been a dream, until he opened his mouth and spoke. Then I had to sink back to my harsh reality.

"How are you doing?" he asks.

I shrug, "I'm trying."

"How long are you going to be here?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say.

Things are different now that my father is home. I was going to leave today but now I can't leave him alone with that woman. She won't miss the second time.

"I'm sorry to sound judgmental, but this is a high stress environment, I know for sure that Zothani would've wanted you to be somewhere peaceful. There's not even a hospital or a good doctor around this place," he says.

"I know that but I can't leave my father to die," I say and realize how really the woman I call a mother has turned my life upside and down. Instead of looking out for criminals, we are now looking out for MaKhumalo.

"The baby's life is important," he says.

Basically he's called me here to tell me I have to leave my home. I'm not sure how I feel about the command in his voice, in as much as I understand where he's coming from.

"I will leave, just not today," I tell him.

"My mother is not well, I don't think she can survive if anything happens to you or the baby. I'm now staying at home to keep an eye on her, things are not good," he says.

I lift my eyes in shock, I knew his parents were not well but I didn't think it was that bad.

"What's wrong with her?" I ask.

"A lot of things, but don't panic, she's in good hands, it will pass." He's just

convincing me something he doesn't believe himself. I want his mother to meet her first grandson, I'd be sad if anything happened to her.

"Don't stress her," I tell him.

His craziness can be enough to raise the poor woman's BP.

"I'm not stressing her," he says, looking at me with a slight frown.

I don't believe him; I give him a look.

"Sisi," he says.

God, no!

I get up and leave immediately. Tears are burning my eyes, that's why I didn't want to be near Nkatha. I don't know who's following me, they're calling my name.

I get inside the house, everyone is looking at me. Sbonga asks what's wrong, I walk past everyone and go to my room and shut the door. Then I throw myself on the bed and cry.

My phone rings in the pocket, I take it out, through tear-blinded eyes I see that it's Nkatha. He probably feels bad, but I don't answer. Sbonga walks in and closes the door behind her.

She sits next to me and asks what happened.

“Did he make you angry?” she asks, worried.

“No, please don't make me talk, I don't want to,” I say.

She nods, “Can I get you something then?”

“No, just go and give them drinks,” I tell her.

She gives me a hug and then leaves.

I feel like Nondu is one person I can talk to about this. She knows grief, she’s been pregnant while going through the most, and mostly she knows about everything that has happened.

I send her a text telling her about what just happened.

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People finally left, the police didn’t arrest anyone and the sangoma left unharmed. MaNkosi has left too, she needed to put

Nzuzo to bed. Sekhona, that child is something else, he left with MaNkosi. He says he's not interested in hearing stories, what he wants is for Njomane to end things and get MaKhumalo out of the house. I wanted the same thing until I realized that he wasn't angry at her. He hasn't addressed anything with her, he responds when she talks to him and calls him 'baba'. I feel betrayed already, he's called the meeting and they're sitting next to each other.

“Firstly, I'd like to apologize to you my kids for giving you a fright. I had to stay away for a while and clear my head and my body from everything that has been to me,” he says.

Why is he calling it 'everything' and not straight up witchcraft?

"You probably wants to know if it's true," he says and takes a deep breath. Then he looks at her, "Your mother tried to kill me. I know I've broken her heart and did things without telling her but I didn't expect such from her."

"So what's going to happen now?" I ask, that's all I want to know.

"Both her and I have to ask for forgiveness from the people we wronged, then do right by them. Otherwise things will continue to fall apart," he says.

I actually can't believe this! He calls being almost killed 'things falling apart'?

“You’re still together? You’re not getting divorced?” - Sbonga.

“No,” he says.

I look at MaKhumalo, she’s smiling.

Sbonga lifts the juice she’s drinking,

“Cheers!”

“Babana are you serious?” I’m beside myself with shock.

“It’s deeper than you think, your mother and I have come very far, we can’t end our marriage over a few mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes, I’m not innocent as well,” he says.

I’ve heard enough, I’ve stayed enough, I’ve seen enough of their faces for 26 years.

Now it’s time for me to go and start my life.

Without Zothani, without a mother and a

father. Just me, my siblings in a distance
and my son.

“Salo don’t leave,” – Sbonga.

I’m not staying for this nonsense. I hope
they’re ready to support each other
because they’re disowned, both of them.

I’m packing what I had left behind the last
time. I will never call this place a home
again. I’m going to create new memories,
all this can go to hell.

Someone stands at the door. I lift my head
hoping it’s my dad he’s changed his mind.

But it’s MaKhumalo, still free and happily
married.

“You can’t always leave when things don’t go how you want them,” she says and walks in.

I don’t respond, I don’t have much that I can say to her.

“I made a mistake, if your father can forgive me then who are you?”

I look at her, “I’m Salabenzeni Mhlongo, that’s who I am.”

“I’m glad you still remember,” she smiles.

I’m not even proud to be still called the name they gave me. Now that I think about it, it doesn’t even have a lovely deep meaning. I’m sure it was a message directed to MaNkosi by my mother.

“Before you leave, can you give us R2 000?

I used all the money thinking the insurances will pay out,” she says.

Well, that didn’t take long.

“You’re asking money from me?”

“Who else must I ask?” She’s very bold.

“The witchdoctor you work with, maybe.

Or the baboon, if you have one. Wait I have a better idea, what about getting muthi that’s going to make you money?” I’m looking at her, arms folded. I’m not scared of her, I don’t care what she’s capable of, I will die only on God’s call.

“Salo what do you think this is? We did everything we did for you to be the light that shines for all of us. You were not born to drive cars, and have a good job earning

thousands and thousands. You're not innocent as you think, you're living off Nondumezulu's blessings."

"Excuse you?" She's gone crazy.

"You think you just got all this success? You're nothing Salabenzeni, you're still that stupid girl whose highest mark in school was 50. You wouldn't be here if I didn't use my brain. You can call me a witch today and think you're holier than me, but you have benefited more than everyone for it."

I can feel my knees trembling but I keep standing, I'm not going to give her the satisfaction she badly wants from me.

"You're talking nonsense," I tell her and pick the picture I was wrapping to pack.

“No my child, this is the truth. Do you honestly think you would’ve turned better than Nondumezulu? You with your two brain cells? Come on baby, yes you’re dumb but not that dumb.”

I didn’t want her to win but I’m crying. I was always compared to Nondu growing up. People didn’t celebrate her intelligence without bringing me down. Not everyone is book smart, but I’m not dumb.

“You’re cruel,” I say between the sobs.

Right now as bitter as it is, I know that she’s capable of messing with Nondu’s life. What I hate is that I might have benefited from it. I wasn’t hungry for wealth, I didn’t care if Nondu was more successful than me. We went to the interview together, I

got the job and she didn't. I didn't ask myself any questions, I thought it was God finally lifting me up. But he didn't, did he?

“So when are you going to send the money?” She's still here.

“In a minute,” I tell her and wipe the tears.

This is probably one of the most impulsive decisions I've ever taken. But I'm Salo, even though I have two brain cells, I still have my pride.

I log into my bank app and transfer all the money I had to her.

She has her phone in her hand, when she sees it she frowns.

“What is this?” she asks.

“Your money. I will resign, you can transfer the blessings from me to you and then then go and apply for the job. Good luck paying the school fees and bills,” I tell her.

“I didn’t mean it this way, I just said you must help us,” she says, her tone has changed.

I have packed everything, I zip the bag.

“I’m not going to give you the car, Zothani bought it for me,” I tell her.

“Salabenzi let’s talk about this. I understand that you’re angry, I didn’t talk to you right and...”

I pick my bag and walk out. After this I understand why Delani is still with her; they did shit together, they are the same, they deserve each other.

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BABO

Busisekile is happy he's back, so happy like nothing happened. Their daughter is gone, she walked with everything, got in the car and left. She's resigning from work, she transferred all the money she has earned from work to her mother. The only child they have left is Sbonga, it might not be for a very long time either.

But he keeps his shoulders up.

Busisekile walks in wearing a short nightdress, revealing her lotioned thighs.

Coconut Clere fills his nostrils as she slides in the duvet and wrapping her arms around him.

“I’m glad you’re back. I didn’t mean to kill you yazi,” she says.

He chuckles, “Don’t lie MaKhumalo, you were angry because of Thembelihle.”

“Okay fine, I was angry. Do you forgive me?” She looks up at him.

“You’re my wife, I can’t be angry at you forever. You and I made vows, nothing can stand between us,” he says.

She smiles, her eyes teary.

“I’m sorry Njomane,” she says.

He lifts her hand, plants a light peck and smiles.

“It’s alright my love. But we have to apologize to the ancestors for all the things we’ve done. It’s the reason why we are fighting a lot and wanting to kill each other. It’s not even really your fault,” she says.

“I knew it, I wouldn’t just want to kill anyone, I’m not crazy,” – Busisekile.

“I know, that wasn’t like you at all. That’s why I want us to cleanse the alter and organize things the way they should be. Let’s give back MaNkosi her husband,” he says, his hand brushes her arm gently.

“But Njomane...”

“Do you want us to end up getting divorced? You will have to go back home, imagine what people will say? MaNkosi

seeing that you failed your marriage? Your enemies?”

She nods slowly, “Yeah, that would be bad. I’m sure MaNkosi would throw a party celebrating if that was to happen. She was enjoying it when that stupid sangoma embarrassed me.”

“You handled that well, now let’s focus on saving our marriage,” Babo says.

She exhales heavily, “But I’m worried about the kids. Salabenzi hates us, she’s even resigning at work.”

“It’s hormones, once she’s given birth she will come back. Remember how you hated everyone when you were pregnant with Sekhona?” They’re both laughing.

“But I didn’t call my mother a witch, she’s disrespectful,” – Busisekile.

“I know, she really disrespected you. You’re a good mom and a good wife.”

She’s smiling, she’s been yearning to hear these words.

Babo embraces her tighter, “I have missed you.”

“I feel so bad that I almost killed you, you’re actually the only person who has my back.”

“Don’t worry, I’m the one who wronged you and you trying to kill me came from a good place.”

“Thank you for freeing my conscience, I’m glad we are still here against all odds. I’m

never going to disappoint you again,” she says.

“Okay my love, let’s sleep. I haven’t had a good sleep in a very long time.”

She smiles seductively, “Don’t you want to warm the sausage before you sleep?”

“Maybe tomorrow, I just want to sleep.” He flashes a gentle smile hoping she doesn’t take it personal and keep her microwave closed.

She doesn’t, she understands.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 53

NONDUMEZULU

I just got a call from Sbonga telling me that Salo drove off angrily and she's planning on resigning from work. I don't know the full story, something must've happened to piss her off. She's had a car accident once, her babydaddy lost his life in a car accident, the last need we need is her on the road while not emotionally okay.

I wouldn't normally just call Dr Manzini but right now he's the only person I can think of. I don't know what I want him to do, he just needs to make a plan and ensure that Salo is okay wherever she is. His phone is ringing.

“Hello Nondumezulu, I was going to give you a call in time,” he says.

He thinks this is about the job, I’m not that unprofessional.

“It’s not about me, I just got a call from Sbonga, Salo left with all her belongings. Something made her angry, she even wants to resign from work,” I say, not even breathing.

“I knew something was going to happen,” he says.

What does he mean he knew something was going to happen?

“Do you know where she’s going?” he asks.

“No, I have no idea, she’s not answering her phone,” I say.

“Okay, thank you for letting me know, I will find her.” He sounds worried but very sure. Now all I can do is wait for him to get back to me with positive news.

Babo is back, I hear. I don’t understand what would make Salo angry because she’s been praying for his return. Maybe there was a fight, or Babo didn’t do what everyone expected from him, which is ending things with Mam’ Busi.

My phone rings; that was fast. I glance at the screen and it’s not Dr Manzini, but a number I don’t know.

I answer hesitantly, “Hello.”

“Hey baby, how are you?”

That's Aunt Teekay's voice, talk about the ray of sunshine!

"Aunt Teekay, is that you?" I'm so happy to hear from her. I don't even know where she lives but I know she's fine, her and my mother communicate.

"It's me, are you okay where you are? Where is the boy you're dating? I hope you're not doing vat'n sat. Have you gotten the job?" she asks all the questions at once.

"Which one must I answer first?" I'm laughing. Our relationship has had some rocky moments, I thought it would take time for us to be back where we were, but she's still the aunt I know.

"Just talk, I'm calling you with someone's phone," she says.

“Who’s that someone?” I ask, surprised.

I haven’t thought about the possibility of her being where she is with an uncle.

“You’re a child, it’s me who asked you questions,” she says.

I laugh, “Okay sorry, I don’t have the job yet, I’m waiting for them to call. No, I’m not living with a man here but he comes to visit.”

“I hear Nzuzo’s father now wants to be a part of his life,” she says.

She’s getting all the gossip from her sister.

“Yeah, he finally feels like fathering him. I met with him and his wife, he doesn’t have anyone who’s going to represent him at home. He was crying, wanting me to feel

sorry for him,” I say, clicking my tongue at the last part.

“Did he say why he denied paternity?” she asks.

“No, he just said he wanted to be Nzuzo’s father but couldn’t for whatever reasons he doesn’t know as well. He said a bunch of nonsense, but I’m over all of that. He can have a relationship with Nzuzo, he just needs to do things the right way. I’m glad Babo is back, he’ll advise my mother on how to handle it,” I say.

“He’s back?” She sounds shocked, very shocked.

“Yes, he showed up at his own memorial service,” I say.

“So he’s home with Makhu...?” Something, or rather someone interrupts her.

I cannot hear their conversation but I can hear a man’s voice. It sounds confrontational, Aunt Teekay is defending herself. It’s obvious now, she’s with someone and that someone isn’t Babo and he hates Babo.

“I will call you tomorrow sthandwa sami,” she says after a moment.

“Okay...Aunt Teekay, do I have an uncle now?” I ask.

“Nondumezulu be a child, if there’s anything for you to know I will tell you.”

“Alright, but are you happy?” I ask.

“Yes baby, I’m happy,” she says.

It's a bit convincing so I let it go and say my goodbyes.

I can't wait to meet him. I hope it's something serious, I don't care if she can't have children and hates marriage, I want her to have someone who deeply cares about her. She needs that.

I make myself something to eat and watch some TV. I'm restless because Dr Manzini hasn't gotten back to me. I don't know if he's finding Salo or not. My phone rings; startling me.

It's Nkalipho, I haven't talked to him since morning.

"Hey babe," I answer.

"Sthandwa sami, I miss you."

He's planning to come, I know his language now.

"What time are you coming?" I ask.

"I'm outside the gate," he says.

Wow, he's so sneaky. I go to the door and wait for him. I can use some company, I'm glad he's here for the third time this week. If he worked close to here I'm sure he would've just moved in with me.

He parks the car and climbs out with a few shopping bags. I know he told me to cut some things but I hope he's got some goodies.

"What's in there?" I ask, peeking through the bags.

"You're not even greeting me, hugging me or giving me a kiss."

I quickly kiss his cheek and grab one bag from his hand. Not the broccoli and carrots! Who is he bringing these for? I only like carrot uncooked, as for broccoli I'm not insane.

"I thought you were bringing me fried chicken or something nice," I say dumping the bag on the floor. All of a sudden it's just too heavy for my arm.

He puts everything on the counter and then attends to my long face.

He kisses my lips multiple times regardless of me not kissing him back.

"You wanted fried chicken?" he asks.

I nod, I'm sulking.

"You're scaring me now, are you pregnant?"

He's crazy.

"No," I say, almost yelling.

That shit scares me, he knows.

"Then you're going through something and finding comfort in food. What is it?"

I had no idea he did Psychology at school.

"I'm not going through anything," I say.

He pushes me against the table, and wraps his hands around my neck and then looks at me in the eyes. It's a deep stare, I feel like he's trying to look into my heart but he's probably seeing my left lung because of how his eyes become when he stares.

"What's bothering you?" he asks.

"Nothing, I'm okay," I say.

"Baby!" His look becomes gentler.

Why can't he take no for an answer?

"I swear, even though there are things stressing me out I chose to ignore them and focus on the bright side of things," I tell him.

"Do you want me to give you a little advice?" He traces his fingers down my jawline.

I'm calming down, he knows how to get through me.

"No matter how stupid you think your problems might sound, they're still going to weigh down on your soul, confront them. I don't care if you gain weight or anything, I'm just worried about your health, the fact that you even bought six-pack of energy drinks and have all those sweets bothers

me. You're not pregnant, you were not acting like this while living with your mom. It's more than just you spoiling yourself. Are you unhappy here?"

A part of me is furious and feeling judged. But there's also a part that understands his concern and admits to everything he's saying. I'm away from my son, sometimes he doesn't want to speak to me over the phone, I left my old job for something I wasn't promised and still don't know where I stand with.

"I'm not telling you what to do with your life, but we are dating Nondu. You raised concerns about my drinking and I've toned it down. I can go a week sober, without having a single shot of alcohol," he says.

I take a deep breath and nod.

“I hear you, I will stop,” I say.

He smiles, “Don’t live on vegetables only, have a little fun, just don’t get addicted like those people on TV, okay?”

I nod, he smiles and gives me a peck on the cheek.

We lock eyes, he holds me around the waist and comes for a deep kiss.

I passionately kiss him back, grabbing his face and letting him run his hand from my waist to below my dress. I’m getting aroused feeling him growing so warm and hard against me.

“I missed you,” he says and chases my lips for more.

I hear the sound of his belt unbuckling, my clit is already throbbing.

He pushes his jeans and boxers down to his knees. Then his hand finds its way to my panties.

“I don’t know how to live without you, Nondu. Ubuthongo abehli when you’re far from me, ngifuna ukuba nawe,” – he says, moaning as his fingers separate and rub my folds.

“You’re with me now.” I drop my hand to his firm butt and squeeze his cheek.

His eyes meet mine, he’s turned on, hardly able to keep his eyelids open.

“How far can you go?” I ask him.

He winces, as if in pain. “All night baby.”

I'd love to see it. I'd love to be spontaneous but he needs to get a condom, that means we are taking it to the bedroom.

I'm the one pulling his hand, I leave him sitting on the bed and get a condom from the drawer. I put it on him, he's looking at me like he needs an energizer.

"Are you good?" I ask.

He licks his lips, they've turned dry. Then he stands and lays me on the bed on my back and separates my legs. I think he's lost his ability to speak.

When he lifts my legs up I expect him to slide in, but he pushes his head down and licks my coochie.

He's shoving his tongue into my opening and sucking my clit. I feel my body

convulsing within a minute, when did he learn to fuck me with a tongue like this?

“Babeee!” I wrap my legs around his shoulders and lock his head between my thighs.

My body is letting off a steam. I’m screaming his name, his licks get audible with the extra wetness.

When I finally let my body loose he gets up and spanks me right on the coochie. I roll to my left side, my legs pressed together, I’m still on cloud nine.

I feel him pulling me from behind. Can’t he let me be for a minute?

I have no energy, he lifts my leg and slides in from behind.

His strokes are fast, hard and deep. He's on the pace that he likes, surprisingly I'm enjoying it too today. With each deep stroke I feel another clit tremble, I'm unable to do anything, he has full control of my body from behind.

My body convulses, I'm back to the cloud of joy.

He gives me no break, he catches no breath, he's still pounding inside me.

"Nkalipho,"

I don't know if he can hear me, my voice is so faint.

There's something on my coochie, it's not his hand. He rubs, or wipes me with it.

He's finally done.

I drag my body, attempting to get off the bed.

“Where are you going?” He pulls me back and throws my leg up.

He penetrates me again, he’s still hard.

“Nkalipho please, just finish.” I never thought I’d ever utter these words.

My eyes can barely stay open. I want him to be done before he burst my womb.

“This is what you want, my love. Is it not? Bamba-ke into yakho!” It’s like he gets infuriated, he picks more pace and slams against my ass. My eyelids shut, the only thing I can still do is moan softly.

“Oh yes, oh yes Ndume baby!”

I open my eyes, it's dark in the room. I can't tell whether it's deep hours of the night or its still early. I feel his hand on my arm, he's still awake.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“It's past 9pm. I thought you were going to sleep all night,” he says.

I was fucked hard, his dick sent me to sleep.

“What did you drink?” I ask.

He laughs and pulls me closer.

“Did I hurt you?” His hand travels down to my mound.

I don't feel any pain but I can definitely feel that something was deep inside me. I'm

moist, too moist, even on my vaginal lips
it's leaking to my inner thighs.

“You didn't burst or take off the condom,
right?” I ask, pity I can't see his face.

“No baby,” he says.

I don't believe him.

“Please don't lie, ngiyacela.”

“You're on contraceptives nje baby,
nothing is going to happen.”

So he came inside me, again?

“You're joking, right?” I ask.

He wraps me in his arms and kisses me on
the neck multiple times before kissing me
all over the face. I'm frustrated and he's not
giving me space to express myself and get
clear answers from him.

“I don’t see myself ever loving anyone else, angisoze ngazisola ngawe, you make me so happy Nondumezulu. Ngingadela konke enginakho ngawe, ngisho uqobo lwami imbala.” He releases a deep heartfelt breath and rests his head on my shoulder. “I love you Njomane kaMgabhi, you’re my straight, my future, my everything. Anything I want to do in life from here, I want to do it with you.”

How do I continue being angry at him after this?

“I love you too sthandwa sami,” I say.

He plants a kiss on my cheek. “I didn’t cum inside you by the way, I kinda put it back in for some time after I was done. I just wanted to stay warm, I’m sorry.”

“Fine, I’m hungry, let’s go and eat,” I say.

I turn the light on, we are both butt-naked.

**He must’ve undressed me when I dozed off,
I don’t know where my dress is.**

“Looking for your dress?” he asks.

“Yes, where is it?” I look at him.

**“It’s not cold, why do you want to dress? I
love watching your flat ass.”**

**I throw the pillow at him. I don’t know why
he always teases me about the flat ass
because it’s not flat. We are laughing,
making our way to the kitchen.**

**“Did you see my phone?” I ask him,
remembering that I was waiting for an
update about Salo.**

**“I switched it off and put it in the drawer,”
he says.**

**I don’t know why he’d switch my phone
off. I was expecting a call from Dr Manzini.
But I don’t say anything to spoil the
moment, he makes both of us cheese
sandwiches and juice. We take it to the
bedroom.**

**My phone is indeed switched off and
thrown inside the drawer.**

**I received two messages from Dr Manzini,
both show that they were opened and read.
He found Salo and took him to his mother’s
house. Then he wanted to come here and
pick me up at 19:56. Even though he didn’t
indicate, I know it was about Salo.**

“Nkalipho,”

He responds with his mouth full.

“Did Dr Manzini call?” I ask.

“Yes, I told him you were asleep, he should call in the morning,” he says.

“And you read the messages he sent?” I ask.

“I wasn’t snooping through your phone. He called, I answered and told him to call in the morning but he still went ahead and texted, so I switched off the phone and put it away,” he says.

“It’s nothing personal, we are both just looking out for Salo. I don’t like what you’re doing, I don’t go through your phone,” I tell him.

I'm not looking for a fight, we are in a great place. But he throws his phone to me, it's unlocked.

“You can go through it, I don't mind. I don't have any problem with you and him sharing common concerns, but he needs to respect that you're someone's girlfriend. I told him to call in the morning, yet he still texted wanting to come and pick you up knowing very well that you're with me. If you don't set boundaries now, I'm afraid things will continue like this even when you're working for him.”

Wow, he's really stretching it.

“Salo could've been needing me,” I say.

“He could've left the message with me. If it was urgent I would've woken you up. I'm

doing my best Nondu, I don't want to fight with anyone, I'm in a good place." Whoah, he's now mentioning fighting my boss. I'm speaking 'boss' into existence. I understand how he feels, but I also understand why Dr Manzini needed me. He can't talk to Mam' Busi about anything, I'm the only close relative of hers that he's able to communicate with.

"Can I call him back?" I ask.

"It's late. Call your sister," he says.

Well, I try Salo's number.

Luckily it goes through and she's still awake to answer.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yes I'm good," she says.

“Sbonga says you want to resign from work, what happened?”

“Everything is wrong Nondu,” she says.

“Even at work?” I ask.

“If my own mother says I don’t deserve it, she took every blessing of yours and gave it to me, then I don’t have to be there. I’m not going to be the beneficiary of witchcraft,” she says.

I’m dumbstruck. I don’t know if her mother told her in confidence or it’s now publicly known like her trying to kill Babo.

“But you can’t resign because of that Salo,” I say.

“Nondu are you hearing me? You didn’t get the job because of me. You struggled because of me. I’m everything but not a

leech. I work hard Nondu, that's what God blessed me with. She can call me dumb and all, but nobody can take away the work I put in to make all my dreams come true. I don't need anything that's not mine," she's obviously still angry.

I understand her parents did some things to block my path and give her the light that my ancestors had given to me. But the same Salo has gotten me to Dr Manzini's office, gotten me not one but two interview chances, and a free behavioral therapy that has helped me in many areas of life.

"I understand you're angry, trust me I do. But there are certain decisions you can't take as a mother. You will leave your job, then what? Trust me, you don't want to be

broke while having full responsibility of raising your child alone,” I tell her.

I hear a loud sniff, my heart breaks.

“It’s not just my child that I have to be responsible for, everybody. It doesn’t matter that I’m the one who wakes up everyday and go to work, when my mother wants money she wants money. She almost killed me just because I said Sbonga and Sekhona have to make compromises for me to be able to save money for the baby,” she says.

I’m lost for words, I can’t believe Mam’ Busi would do that to her own child.

“Can I come and see you tomorrow?” I ask.

“Yeah, I will ask Nokwanda to come and fetch you,” she says.

I end the call with a broken heart. This thing has gotten out of hand even for Mam' Busi, what she's doing is going to destroy her own family. Without Salo they're nothing, she's destroying the same legacy she was trying to build with her witchcraft.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 54

NONDUMEZULU

It's another day, I still wake up as an unemployed South African. Nkalipho left

for work early, it was before 7am. I didn't even get to make him lunch, I hope his father doesn't judge me when he sees that. I'm getting dressed, Dr Manzini's daughter is on her way to pick me up. I haven't called my mom to check how they slept.

My phone rings, disturbing me from styling my hair. Natural hair can be annoying, I feel like I always look the same, I need to upgrade my hairstyling skills. It's Solwazi calling, why did I unblock him again? It's just 9 in the morning, what does he want?

"Hi," I press the phone between my shoulder and ear.

"Maka Boy, are you home?" he asks.

That sounded very unnatural. Nobody calls Nzuzo 'Boy', he's Nzu.

“No, I’m not home. What do you want?” I sound a little bit mean.

“Malume has agreed to come and meet with your mother. I wanted to find out from you which date is possible?” he asks.

“I will ask my mother and text you. But she’s hardly ever busy,” I say.

“I’d be very grateful,” he says.

I wait for him to end the call but he doesn’t.

“Is there anything else?” I ask

“Can I take him home from school?”

Speed kills!

“No, you’re a stranger to him. I can’t let him get picked up by someone he doesn’t know,” I say.

“When are you going to be back? Maybe if I see him when he’s with you it will be better. I just want to get to know him, I know you’re still angry at me but I’m begging you,” he says.

Phewww, this is rather exhausting. But I said I’m moving on from the past, I should act like it.

“We will tell you,” I say.

“You and who?” he asks.

“Me and Nkalipho, my boyfriend.”

What’s that beep? Oh, call ended.

He will be strong because Nkalipho is in my life and Nzuzo’s life, he’s going to be forever on the face of anyone who associate themselves with us.

Nokwanda arrives, she calls when she's outside the gate. She's in a silver Renault Kiger, I really pray that Nzuzo one day classifies as a rich kid too, even though I kinda don't like rich kids. I open the door and get inside, she's playing music softly, everything smells expensive.

“Are you good?” I ask her.

“Yeah I'm good. You look hot,” she says.

She's just pulling my leg, I never look hot, maybe clean is the word. It's her who looks hot with those new braids and smooth skin. I swear she's never grown a pimple.

“So you're in university or what?” I ask.

“Yeah I am, boring life,” she rolls her eyes.

University isn't boring, or maybe it is if you already have everything you want in life.

The only reason I didn't enjoy my years was because I had a child at home, otherwise those could've been the best years of my life.

She's actually easy to be around, we have a smooth ride talking about anything that comes to mind. Dr Manzini's car is parked in the yard; he's here too. I'm a bit uncomfortable because we haven't talked since his last attempts of getting hold of me. I don't know if Nkalipho was nice to him and how he took it when he told him to call in the morning. He didn't call me in the morning, that says something.

It's a family house, not that intimidating from the outside but once you step inside it's a whole different scenario. It's very beautiful, the kitchen is to die for. You can tell that there's no child around, everything is squeaky clean.

I find Salo with Mam' Zungu, they're watching TV.

I greet, Nokwanda shows me where to sit then disappears.

"Ninjani Ma?" I ask Mam' Zungu.

She's an old woman, I'm sure this is even harder on her.

"We are trying mntanami. I was only told this morning that someone special was coming," she says.

I laugh, “I need no special treatment, don’t worry yourself Ma.”

“No, we don’t want a bad record from our in-laws,” she struggles to stand up. Salo gets up and helps her, she’s really frail. “Let me give you some privacy, Nokwanda will bring you snacks.”

I watch her walk away, she raised two successful sons, she saw both of them grow and reaped the fruits of her womb. I wish my mother can get to live a good life one day as well.

“Are you okay?” – Salo.

I turn and look at her. Mam’ Busi has lived and reaped the fruits of her womb, which she did by force and destruction. But I’m not here about me, I’m here for her.

“I should be asking you that. Are you okay?” I ask her.

“Yeah, it’s just that I feel homeless,” she says and chuckles.

I glance around and then lean forward to whisper;

“Homeless on that expensive leather couch?”

She laughs, “Well, I do. You also know how I feel about some people, everyone is here.”

I’m not sure I’m on the page she thinks I’m at.

“What do you mean?” I ask, my voice kept low.

“Nkatha, he’s temporarily living here,” she says.

Oh shit, now I remember.

“How are you dealing with it? I mean you can’t avoid him in the same house,” I ask.

“I think he knows that he triggers me, he’s been keeping his distance and only talking to me when necessary,” she says.

I completely understand her, she can’t heal while there’s a photocopy of Zothani around her. She’s still struggling to accept that he’s dead and she’s never going to see him again.

Now to what brought me here...

“You didn’t resign, right?” I ask.

“No, not yet,” she says.

She’s still considering it?

“You don’t have to do this Salo. Think about Sbonga and Sekhona, maybe your child will be fine because he will be born into this family. You resigning from your job will not only hurt your mother but your siblings as well. They’d have to come back from boarding school to attend local schools, living with your mother 24/7,” I say.

“I transferred all my savings to her,” she says.

“You’re kidding, right?” I’m shocked.

That’s such a stupid thing to do. That means now Mam’ Busi can afford even more expensive muthi to bewitch people.

“It’s more than just black tax for me, she’s emotionally abusing me, I can’t stand that,” she says.

Wow, I didn’t think things have gone this far.

“Do they know?” I ask about the Zungus.

“Nkatha knows,” she says.

“And what he say when you told him you’re basically now a broke bitch?”

She laughs, “He just said I mustn’t worry and said they’ll support whatever decision I take.”

“I really hope you change your mind and not resign. Just leave things the way they are and enjoy your maternity leave before making any big decision,” I say.

She sighs heavily and nods. The little one is growing, her tummy looks big in that T-shirt.

Nokwanda comes with two plates of finger food and then leaves and comes back again with a wine glass for me and juice for the pregnant lady.

“Do you guys need anything else before I go?”

Salo looks at her, “I thought you’d be here till noon.”

“I’m meeting up with a friend. Don’t worry, Nkatha will take Sis’ Nondu home when she’s ready.”

What on earth? She said Nkatha without flinching.

She leaves, I'm looking at Salo with my mouth hanging open.

"Everyone is their name, no titles," she explains, laughing.

"Yeer, I can't imagine Nzuzo calling me by name like that." Maybe I will when I'm rich, there'd be more important things to focus on in life than being called Mama.

"Speaking of him, your child is very strange," she says.

I blow out a sigh, I'm sure he pulled some stunt at the memorial service. Nzuzo can either hate gatherings with his all or love them to the point of annoying everyone.

"What did he do?" I ask.

"He predicted Njomane coming home. I went to your mother's house to visit and he

asked me at the door if I was back to see mkhulu. I said no and lied that Njomane was overseas, I wasn't sure how to address death with him. And guess what? He straight up told me I was lying," she says.

I'm not surprised, Nzuzo talks a lot.

"Sometimes he just says things and they turn out to be true," I say and pick the wine Nokwanda brought me. I'm surprised that they offer wine to their guests, I heard that the parents are very religious.

"That's scary, don't you think?" Salo asks.

"In what way?" I look at her.

"That maybe he's not just making things up by coincidence. He insisted that I was home to see my father and he actually returned home," she says.

“I haven’t thought about it,” I say.

She’s actually scaring me. My mother and I have never looked at it more than just him being a kid. He’s said a lot of things in the past that turned out to be true.

“Does Solwazi’s family has a history of spirituality? Because at home we don’t,” she says.

“I don’t know, please stop scaring me. He can’t be dealing with such among other difficulties that he already has,” I say.

She’s looking at me like I’m crazy.

Then she laughs, “It’s not a bad thing, it’s not like he speaks to ghosts. Just keep an eye on the things he says, don’t ignore him.”

Okay, now I’m stressed.

I leave Salo in a better mood, I'm being driven back to Shakaskraal by Dr Manzini. It's around mid-day, I'm going back to be bored, there's nothing special about me these days. Life was even better when I was a cashier, at least I had something to wake up for.

Dr Manzini only greeted me, we are on the road and neither one of us has spoken. I would like to know if he had a disagreement with Nkalipho over the phone, and is he angry at me for calling him for help and then ignoring him.

But I can't start a conversation with him, I doubt anyone does easily.

He must've felt my desire to speak to him;
he clears his throat,

“I'm sorry I haven't responded to you.

Family challenges got on the way, but I will
tell them to send you the contract today,”
he says.

“The contract?” I feel like my ears are
deceiving me.

“Yes, we will open for business on Monday,
you can start on Thursday.”

I can't scream inside his car. I'm hired!!!

“So Dr Khan gave a good feedback about
me?” I can't believe it.

“Yes, you did well. Thank you for
complying, I will welcome you well once
I'm emotionally okay,” he says. Grief is still
evident on his face.

**“Thank you so much, Dr Manzini,” I say
and hold my mouth so that I don’t scream.**

I don’t know what the side-eye means.

**I keep quiet, I will scream in the house and
call my mother.**

**He parks outside my gate and blows out a
heavy sigh.**

**Then he looks at me, “Did I put you in any
trouble last night?”**

He’s finally addressing it.

“Yeah, kind of,” I say.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know about him.”

**This is rather awkward, maybe it was
better we don’t talk about it.**

“Thanks for coming to see her today, I didn’t think you’d come, your boyfriend sounded pretty upset,” he says.

“He was upset?” I ask.

“Yes, so I didn’t want to call you in the morning, I didn’t want to upset him any further or give out the wrong ideas,” he says.

He’s making it sound like Nkalipho is a child, I’m feeling the need to explain.

“He’s gone through a lot in life. He worries when he doesn’t understand what’s happening. I don’t know what he said to you but he was probably triggered. There was a little confusion with you dropping me off with food and sending Salo’s flowers the next morning.”

“He thinks I’m going to take you?” he asks, a bit too blunt for me.

“No, I’m not a girl that can be easily taken. We are all born differently, his experiences have made him who he is. He’s not insecure, he just worries a lot,” I say, defensively.

He smiles. I swear I’ve never seen him smile, he’s always looking like he’s planning murder.

“So what’s going to happen when you and I start working together?” he asks.

It’s a valid question but I feel like he’s just asking because he’s entertained, not that he cares.

“There will be boundaries,” I say, quoting from Nkalipho’s words.

He chuckles, “Okay. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

I feel like I fucked up when I tried to explain. I didn't owe him any explanation, I should've let it be. Now I feel like I've given out files about Nkalipho's life and exposed his weaknesses to someone he doesn't even like. If he find out about the conversation we had, he'd be hurt and the hurt Nkalipho equals to disaster.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 55

NONDUMEZULU

I have to keep pinching myself on the arm, the arm of a lab technician, to believe I'm still real. I called my mom and told her the good news. Nzuzo agreed to speak to me, I told him I have a new job now and he's going to get everything he wants, he said okay and gave the phone back to my mother. Nkalipho said he was busy when I tried to tell him. He still hasn't gotten back to me, I'm trying not to be angry. He has a job, he can't be on the phone for hours giving me congratulation speeches. I don't know how many times I've stopped myself from calling him again.

I'm so happy, I don't know what to do with this kind of happiness. I'm at the point where I even want to call Mam' Busi and her husband, just to let them know that the girl who lived on tin fish has now signed a 5 year working contract. I'm still at the entry level with not much experience but the money is five times better than what I earned as a cashier. I'm going to take my son to a better advanced school next year, my mother can finally become the queen she's already acted as, all my dreams are about to come true.

Fuck it, I'm calling Nkalipho again.

"Babe," he answers.

I can hear the noise in his background, he's still at the site.

“When are you going to call me back?” I ask.

“As soon as we are done here babe. Are you okay over there?”

I sigh, “I got the job, I want to celebrate and there’s no one to do that with me. I’m w second away from calling Mam’ Busi and telling her.”

“And why would you do that? You want to lose the job before you even start.”

“Because being happy in secret is boring,” I say.

“Okay, I will send you the money to go to the mall and spoil yourself with whatever you want. Congratulations my love, I’m happy for you,” he says.

“You’re still going to call me, right?” I ask.

He laughs, “Yes.”

“Okay, send the money.”

I haven't worn shorts in a long time, today I feel like letting loose and going out looking like a Nondu, not Nzu's mother. Once I put my ripped shorts on and ankle-boots that I only wore once after buying them on a sale special, I realize that I still have it- I'm hot. I tie my hair neatly on top and add the stud-earrings that my hawker suitor gifted me with.

Notification beeps from my phone; that's my money.

As usual, he sent more than I expected. I thank him with a text, he's probably still busy for phone calls. I will get myself some new dresses and do my hair in the salon.

Then I will have a meal at Spur, then buy a bottle of champagne. Even if alone, I will celebrate.

There's not so much crowd at the mall, I do my shopping in peace and find a less-busy salon to do my hair. I didn't think I'd be still at the mall by this time. Nkalipho hasn't called me back, it's been over 3 hours, I'm a bit irritated because he promised to call. But I won't call him again, when he sees it fit he will call.

"You have healthy hair," the hairstylist compliments.

She's done, I see my reflection in the mirror, my hair is inches longer than it was.

“Thank you, I will be back for plaiting,” I say.

They’re expensive, I won’t be back.

“Take my number, ask for me when you come again,” she gives me her cellphone number.

“I’m Regina,” she says.

I add the number to my contacts and thank her. She has a foreign accent, I notice that she’s not talking much to her colleagues, she’s probably still new. Maybe I will come again, it will depend on the finances.

“Can you send me a good picture if you happen to take one showing your hair?” she asks.

“Yeah sure, I will take one with my boyfriend’s iPhone and send you,” I say.

She helps me carry all my shopping bags and sees me to the salon door. She's actually very nice, I like her, she doesn't look that much older than me. Maybe I should start making friends again, that way I can stop bothering Nkalipho and wanting to talk to him every hour.

The taxi drops me down the street, it's just a two-minutes walk to my gate. Walking through the gate I'm surprised to see Nkalipho's car parked outside. Why is he here without telling me? I've been expecting his call and mad at him. God of spare keys, this man is really taking full advantage of his key. I have his house key

too, it's about time I start surprising him with random visits too.

I'm at the door, there's more than one voice inside here. Then I hear his little voice, I don't know when I dropped the shopping bags. I'm picking him up, kissing him all over the face. My attention is on him, I don't see anyone else, just him only.

“Are you okay baby?” I ask him.

He nods and touches my hair. He recognizes the difference.

“Lume cut my hair too,” he says and touches the new hair-cut on his head.

I didn't notice, he looks so cute.

“Did you say thank you to Lume?” I ask.

He nods, “Yes.”

Nkalipho laughs. This brat probably didn't thank him.

I look around my small lounge and see my mother and two of her church friends seated on the couch. I'm wearing shorts, my bum is almost showing.

"Sanibonani," I greet.

I'm not sure what's going on here. Nkalipho surprising me with Nzuzo makes sense, but my mother and Aunt Janine and Maka Khulu?

Others greet me back, my mother doesn't.

My dress code is the problem, I take Nzuzo with me to the bedroom to change.

Nkalipho follows us shortly.

He closes the door, "You look hot."

“Well, you could’ve told me you were bringing them over, my mother hates shorts,” I say.

“I didn’t know you wear shorts and show your bum in public,” he says.

Didn’t he compliment me just a second ago? Hypocrisy.

“I’m not a granny, you could’ve figured it out,” I say.

“Figured out that you’d be advertising your bum at the mall?” He picks Nzuzo up.

Our eyes lock, he’s saying all that with a smile on his face.

“Do you have a problem with the shorts?” I have to know because right now he’s just giving me mixed vibes. If he starts acting like a different version of my mother than

he'd be confusing being a boyfriend with being my father.

“No, I don't have a problem,” he says and kisses Nzuzo's cheek and turns to the door.

“That's not cute,” I say behind him.

“Okay, you're cute,” – he says, walking out.

He's on a mission today. Surprises, confusion and charm.

I walk back and get a look of approval from my mother. Nzuzo comes off Nkalipho's lap and comes to sit on mine. He's in a good mood today.

“There's nothing much, I came with omama to give you a prayer,” – my mother.

I look at Nkalipho, he looks comfortable around them.

“A prayer for what?” I ask.

Maka Khulu answers, unimpressed with my question;

“You need to be closer to God, even this place needs to be prayed for. Without his grace you wouldn’t have gotten the job,” she says.

“Okay, I understand,” I say.

My mother stands, she starts a song and others join in, even Nkalipho. I’m grateful they’re here and doing this, it just makes me a little bit emotional. It’s been a very long time, my mother has endured the most, from criticism and being blamed for me falling pregnant at 16, to her suffering while

my degree collects dust and watching other women living large through their children. I haven't heard her pray this hard in years. Aunt Janine asks for a basin of water, they all pray for it then my mother sprinkles it all around the house.

After the prayer Nkalipho asks that we go and get food for them. They can't leave without eating anything, I know that would piss Maka Khulu off. I wanted Nzuzo to come with us but his favourite cartoons came on.

It's me and this man in the car, so I continue with the fight.

“Those weren't even bum shorts, I don't understand why you said I was advertising my bum in public,” I say.

“Did I say that?” He fakes confusion, he knows very well what he said.

“Yes, and I want to know why you said that. I didn’t have a price tag hanging from my bums, so how was I advertising?” I ask.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

He’s not sorry, he’s dismissing me.

“Should I get rid of them?” I ask, this is just a little test.

“I don’t know, should you?” He looks at me with a little grin.

I give up! I sigh and look outside the window.

“I let that go, you brought it up. And I didn’t say I don’t want you to show your bum or whatever you want to show, just let

me know that you're into such, otherwise I will be surprised when I see something strange and I will comment on it," he says.

"So I should call and say, 'hey babe today I will be wearing shorts'?" I ask.

"Nondu don't make me something I'm not. Today is about your happiness, I'm sorry if what I said upset you, I take it back," he says.

This time it sounds genuine, even though he's pushing the matter at hand aside.

"Cool, just so you know though I do have shorts and revealing dresses, I wear them when I'm happy and feeling sexy," I say.

He exhales heavily, "Okay, I hear you."

We got food and drinks, I don't know why he bought the cake as if it's my birthday. But I'm happy, very happy. We may have our challenges but I don't think I've ever had anyone who loves me this much. My mother and my son are here, I'm celebrating with them.

Nzuzo doesn't want to eat anything, he just wants the cake and he's impatient. Before he turns it into a scene, I ask Nkalipho to cut it and give him a piece; I'm still listening to Aunt Janine's stories. They both go to the kitchen, leaving me with three women.

“Has he said anything about marriage?”
Aunt Janine asks.

I wouldn't expect that question from anyone but her.

"We are not ready for marriage," I tell her.

She frowns, all of them do.

"Meaning?"- Maka Khulu.

"There are things we want to achieve first before getting married," I say.

They can't fathom it.

Nkalipho comes back with Nzuzo stuffing his face with a big slice of cake behind him.

He sits, they're staring at him.

"They wanted to know if we are going to get married," I fill him in.

"Oh okay," he says.

Silence...

Then Aunt Janine asks, “Do you love her enough?”

“I love her,” he says, taking a glance at me.

Why am I blushing?

“Then marry her,” – Aunt Janine, she’s so invasive.

Nkalipho looks at me, it looks like he needs someone to save him.

“He will, when the time is right. For now we are figuring it out together and learning more about each other, nevertheless he’s committed to me and I’m committed to him. He’s my partner and my son’s favourite uncle, I love him more than he thinks,” I say, right in front of my mother.

She’s actually smiling, at this point she can’t even pretend to hate my mjolo.

Nkalipho's gentle stare warms my heart. I smile and he smiles back.

I lean over, trying to get a kiss.

Loud clap of hands!

I stop myself, Nkalipho drops his eyes. We got caught up in the moment, now my mother is not impressed. Aunt Janine is holding her Bible tightly while looking at us like demons. Maka Khulu is looking at my mother. You know the kind of look that pushes for violence.

“Don't commit that sin in front of us, at least wait until we are gone,” my mother says.

“But it doesn't say no kiss before marriage,” I say in a low mumble.

**Nkalipho covers his face with his hands.
Nzuzo feels sorry for him and gives him a
kiss on the cheek with his untidy mouth,
everybody laughs.**

Phewww, that was almost awkward.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 56

MANKOSI

**The man she's sitting with is her late
husband's uncle's cousin. A very distant
relative she hasn't seen in years. He's old,**

he only comes when there's a pressing matter. It was surprising for her to see him at her door with his walking stick. He looks very frail, he could've sent his grandchildren for whatever it is. MaNkosi quickly changed to a longer dress and laid a scarf on her shoulders and made him tea. Even drinking is hard for him, his hands tremble to almost dropping the cup.

He still hasn't said why he's here.

"You live alone here koti?" He's asked her this twice.

"My daughter left a few weeks ago in search for a better job, I'm with my grandson," she says.

"Oh, has they paid for her?" He's asking about the lobola, to him Nondu having a

child automatically means she should be married or in the process of doing so.

“I’m still expecting the baby’s family to come and pay for the damages. Things didn’t work out between Nondumezulu and the baby’s father,” MaNkosi says.

“That’s bad, it’s going to be hard for her to find marriage now,” the old man says, very disappointed.

It’s a normal reaction MaNkosi has gotten many times in the past, everyone thinks Nondumezulu is damaged goods and it’s going to be difficult for any man to love her. She’s not going to correct the narrative, what matters is that her daughter is happy with who she’s with and he’s a good boy.

“I was called here by Delani, he says there’s an urgent family matter that needs me here,” Mkhulu Mhlongo says.

MaNkosi frowns, she didn’t know about any of this. As if the universe wants to clear her confusion, Babo and Busisekile walk in. She offers them a seat and fetches extra cups of tea, the water is still hot.

MaKhumalo doesn’t bother, her husband is humble enough to make a cup. The sugar or tea-bags is probably a very cheap brand for Busisekile. Maybe this meeting is about her trying to kill her husband, the issue can’t be let go just like that, an apology has to be made to every family member, living and late ones.

“Fill me in ndodana before my heart kills me, what is the matter?” Mkhulu Mhlongo demands to know, fixing his gaze at Babo

“Mhlongo let me start by apologizing for troubling you, I know you have health challenges, unfortunately this needed you to be physically here,” Babo says, and sips his tea and looks up heaving a deep sigh.

“MaNkosi, I apologize to you as well for not informing you about any of this, it had to happen as soon as possible,” he says.

MaNkosi nods, she has a little idea but she’s not sure yet.

“My wife and I have a confession to make,” he says.

Everyone goes dead quiet, Busisekile is playing with her hands avoiding eye contact.

The old man puts down his cup and looks at both of them, eyebrows raised.

“As you all know my brother and I never got along, because of that I always try to show all my kids equal love, I know what favoritism does to children after the parents are dead,” he says.

Busisekile gives him a look, he’s making this about him and wasting time.

“I allowed hate to lead me and because of that today I want to confess that my wife and I had a hand in his death,” he says.

MaNkosi already knew but hearing it in this manner sends her to tears. Yes, things were

horrible between them, her husband wasn't the best brother, he did a lot of things wrong to Babo. But to kill him and turn her into a widow? She didn't deserve that, Nondu deserved to grow up with a father.

“Delani what are you saying?” – Mkhulu Mhlongo, he's scared and confused.

Busisekile exhales heavily, she's been put in a very bad spot here, however she has to do this for her marriage. MaNkosi will have to forgive them, it happened ages ago, her husband's sex drive would've been dead by now anyway.

“I'm so sorry boNjomane, I want to make things right. I want to apologize to my brother as well, I never got to tell him how I feel, I just need a chance to bring him

back to his rightful place and let him rest in peace,” he says.

“You killed your brother? Umfowenu owakushiyela ibele?” Mkhulu Mhlongo can’t believe it. He’s angry but he’s no longer fit to manhandle anyone, all he can do is yell.

MaNkosi is still crying. Busisekile gets off her seat and goes to her with tissue.

“Askies MaNkosi,” she says plainly, with no hint of remorse.

MaNkosi shakes her head; “Askies? That’s all you can say MaKhumalo? You and your husband killed the father of my child, the love of my life, and carried on with life like nothing happened.”

“We made a poor decision,” Busisekile says.

“A terrible sin MaKhumalo, not a poor decision. Both of you will live a miserable life for what you did. You’ll be miserable!” She’s bottled this anger and locked her tears up in her eyelids, but she can’t anymore, she’s got nothing to lose, they destroyed everything already.

“Calm down koti, I know you’re angry and I understand why. But we have to tackle this is a family while keeping in mind that your husband needs to find peace and a good rest,” Mkhulu Mhlongo says.

Babo looks at her, he’s the only one looking genuinely apologetic.

“Please MaNkosi, accept our apologies. I know you’re a good hearted woman, that’s why my brother loved you so much. Don’t hold grudges like me, look where that has led me, I’m a killer and a witch,” he says.

“You and her,” MaNkosi says, giving Busisekile a mean glare. She then wipes her tears and calms down. It hurts like her husband just died. She wanted this, them finally confessing everything they did and voluntarily bringing back everything that belongs to her.

“Where’s my daughter’s graduation picture?” she asks Busisekile, calmly.

Mkhulu Mhlongo looks at the two of them, right now he’s just a second away from

having a heart attack. What has his cousin's house turned into?

“Njomane already destroyed that, he did some time ago,” Busisekile says.

“Why did you do that in the first place? Sally was going to get her own blessings, she's a good child and now you've messed her up,” – MaNkosi.

“So you did things to the kids as well?”

Mkhulu Mhlongo raises his eyebrows, his hands are shaking.

They keep quiet.

“Speak MaKhumalo, tell him that you wanted my child to suffer. You could've gotten things to make Sally's light shine without dimming Nondu's, the only thing you wanted was to see me suffer because in

your head we are in a competition. I'm not in your lane MaKhumalo, I never was and I never will be, know that and know peace," MaNkosi says.

Busisekile claps her hands and laughs. She's here because of her husband, not to allow this woman to walk all over her. Before she opens her mouth and says something that can destroy what they're trying to do, Babo intervenes.

"We know better now," he says.

Everybody seem to calm down.

Mkhulu Mhlongo releases a deep breath and looks at everyone with disappointment.

"Unfortunately you can't just apologize by mouth, I don't know how MaNkosi is ever

going to heal from this, but the first thing for you two to do is come here with a goat, stand at the gate with it and redo this confession and all other dirty things you've done. It will be your chance as well Delani to say whatever you have to say to your brother about how things ended between the two of you," he says.

"Is a goat not an exaggeration though? We can just bring a chicken and give her some food parcels," Busisekile asks.

MaNkosi shakes her head and looks away.

"We will do the goat, even a cow if needed," Babo says and shoots an icy glare at her.

She doesn't look very happy about that.

MaNkosi is taking advantage of them now.

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They all gather below the gate, Babo is holding a goat while on his knees next his wife.

Mkhulu Mhlongo is seated on the plastic chair while MaNkosi is on the grass-mat at the side watching everything unfolds. The kids couldn't be here, some reconciliation and peace-making will be done for them too even though Salo and Nondu never had any ill feelings towards one another.

“I never felt loved by your husband, MaNkosi. My own brother, I never felt cared for. I was still young when you married him, I'm sure you remember how

he treated me before I got my own space. I didn't have a house back then, I had to beg for building material from neighbors in order to build a shack for myself. I'm not going to say you turned a blind eye, but you were silent when he called me names in front of people. He didn't allow me to be involved in Smangele's funeral, I attended as a guest, but he knew very well that I wasn't going to heal easily without getting closure. He wasn't happy when MaKhumalo came, he didn't like the fact that I was able to have a child before him. He knew he wasn't going to be able to control me and make me feel like I was nothing anymore," he takes a brief pause. Busisekile is brushing his arm in consolation.

“But I have forgiven him, I know he didn’t just become that way, our parents taught him that he was better than me and he grew with it. Today I kneel here as his brother and killer, I ask for forgiveness for all the pain I’ve caused to his family,” he says.

It’s hard for MaNkosi, she’s crying again. Some things he said her husband should’ve answered, but he’s not around anymore. She can’t defend some of his actions, however that doesn’t excuse what Babo did to him, not even in a slightest way.

He turns and looks at his wife.

Busisekile clears her throat, “I apologize for everything I’ve done and said.”

“Don’t be shy MaKhumalo, say what you’ve done,” – MaNkosi.

She’s enjoying this, isn’t she?

“For trying to help my family, I didn’t mean to hurt anyone and take things this far, I felt like his forefathers had turned their backs on him and my daughter,” she says.

It’s not constructed how MaNkosi would’ve wanted it to be, but she’s finally admitted that she’s a witch, now they can carry on.

The poor goat is about to be slaughtered for the things that two people did out of hatred and jealousy. They have to be fast because she still has to fetch Nzuzo from school.

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

Babo comes inside the house with a confused look on his face. Why there's a woman he doesn't know coming to his house? They just had the most heaviest day of their lives, they need some privacy.

"Are you expecting someone?" he asks.

"Yes. Is she here already?"- Busisekile, she's wearing a white gown, her head is wrapped in a towel, she just took a bath.

Before Babo can ask any further questions, the girl knocks at the door.

Busisekile rushes to open, she's excited about this person, what took place today didn't disturb her peace in any way. The

girl is carrying a huge bag, hopefully she's not moving in.

“This is my masseur,” Busisekile says.

He frowns, “What is that?”

“Someone who's going to massage me. Professional kind of massaging and reflexology,” she says.

He's even more confused.

“Reflexo-whatever, is it free?”

The girl smiles, “No baba, I charge per hour.”

This gotta be a joke!

He pulls Busisekile to the side.

“I said we are saving the money

Salabanzeni gave you out of anger for rainy

days. What if she really resigns, how are we going to pay the school fees for the children if you carelessly spend it on useless things?”

She flutters her eyes, “My body is not useless Njomane. Do you know what I’ve been through in this life? Salo is not going to resign, she knows that she has responsibilities.”

“You don’t know that. You and I are broke, you used all the money for the stupid memorial service hiring expensive chairs and MCs,” he says.

“Because I’m a good wife, I wanted you to have the best possible memorial service, and I thought the insurance was going to

pay out.” She’s never wrong, and right now Babo realizes that she’s losing her sanity.

They’re in the kitchen, he notices a bottle of alcohol on the counter.

“And that?” he asks.

“That’s a ‘champion’, people drink it when getting massage,” she says.

“MaKhumalo you’re leading us to poverty,” he’s running out of words.

Even though his love for her has died, he still wants to be a father to their children, he doesn’t want to go from riches to rags.

Busisekile picks her bottle and mug and walks away.

“Do they drink it in mugs though?” he asks in a defeated tone.

She disappears without answering. Her and her masseur go to the main bedroom to set up for their session. It's a house-call, she's obviously going to pay an arm and leg.

She pours her bubbles in the mug and takes a sip. It's not really what she expected, her face says it all.

“Have you drank champagne before?” the girl asks.

She coughs, “Yeah, these are my things.”

She's just getting started, these will be her things now going forward, Salo is really a blessing in her life. She lies on her stomach and lets the girl does what she's paying her to do. Wow, this is the best side of life she's never thought she'd experience.

She's moaning as hands rolls on her back, doing their magic. One hour may be not enough, she's enjoying this.

There's a knock at the door, it's Babo.

"Your husband is here," the girl tells her.

"What do you want?" she asks with her eyes closed.

"There are women here saying they're fetching food parcels," Babo says.

She asks the girl for a minute break so that she can attend to the matter.

Babo follows her behind, he wants answers.

"I decided to give away some of the groceries, there's just two of us here, we can't use all those things I bought," she says.

He's running out of words, today she's on a mission.

"You're Mother Teresa now, you're feeding the township with what could've sustained us for months?" He's in disbelief.

"Njomane stop complaining about everything. Is your phone charged? We have to take pictures of them with 'our food', I will send them to the journalist," she says.

"It's not going to fix your reputation," he says.

They walk out to a group of women, some have little babies on their backs.

"Sanibonani bomakhi," Busisekile greets, waving her hand at them.

They greet back, all of a sudden they've forgotten what she appeared in the newspaper for, poverty makes people do crazy things.

"Okay, stand in a line," Busisekile instructs.

She's treating them like kids and they're complying.

"Is that you MaNgwane there?" she asks and laughs. MaNgwane is one of MaNkosi's friends, how surprising is it that she's here!

She leaves them standing in the queue and fetches grocery packages from the house.

"Njomane please take every picture," she pleads before handing the parcel to the first person.

"Smile," she tells the woman.

Babo sighs and sets the camera.

This playing-along strategy is going to be draining.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 57

NONDUMEZULU

Solwazi's uncle finally went to see my mother. Firstly he'd be coming again with a goat to apologize to Nzuzo for denying him, then damages will be paid in full. Things are slowly working out, for both Nzuzo and

I, and that makes me happy. I'm counting days before I go start at my new work.

My phone rings, I check and it's Solwazi.

He no longer sends Samantha to call or use his many different phones. In his head we are now best friends.

"Hey," I answer.

"Maka Boy unjani?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm okay and you?"

"I'm okay as well. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

He is actually, I was breathing.

"You can talk," I say.

"My uncle went to your mother as you asked. He came back with all the requests, I will honor them as soon as possible. She

also told my uncle about Boy's condition," he says like it was the first time he heard about it.

"I have a friend who deals with special children. I wanted to ask if you're available later, I'd pick Boy from your mother's house and come by you, then we'd go see him," he says.

"Today?" I ask.

"Yeah, just for conscience, I heard you'll be starting a job soon. I wouldn't want to take him without you," he says.

I look at the time, it's still 9am and I'm not doing anything.

"Okay, he gets out of school by 12:55," I say.

"Okay, can I have your address?" he asks.

After everything he's said about Nkalipho it wouldn't surprise me if one day he came here to create problems for me. I'd be stupid to give him my address.

"You will pick me up in Stanger," I say.

"Oh, that's better, we will talk then."

What I need to do is call Nkalipho and tell him. I don't want him to get the wrong idea, I only agreed to this because Nzuzo has to come first and there's no help I'd turn down because of personal issues.

I know this guy, they were friends when him and I dated. He's the head of this facility; they deal with children mostly. They were a group of squad, coming from

financial-stable homes and getting any girl they want. I'm not surprised they all made it in life; connections are a key to success.

For someone who missed his baba and refused to shave his head because he wanted to look like him, Nzuzo is too quiet. Even when he a toy truck that drives itself and blows ambulance sirens, Nzuzo still didn't warm up to him.

Right now he's sitting on his lap but his eyes are on me. He's scared I might sneak out and leave him with these people.

Sboniso asked me to fill a questionnaire, I've answered a lot of questions as well, he's called the clinic that Nzuzo goes to and talked to them. I don't think he believes that Nzuzo is autistic based on the

character he sees now and how perfect his speech has become. I can't even tell you how that happened, last year he struggled with a lot of words and right now he just talks with little to no difficulties.

“What used to be his biggest challenge? Social interaction, behavior or speech?”

*All of it, he's just better now. But behavior is still a problem, if he doesn't get what he wants he fights, sometimes he doesn't say what he wants at all and just acts up. His speech is good, not polished but he's much better now at 8,” I say.

“And his social interaction?” he asks.

I look at Nzuzo, his eyes haven't left me.

“Sometimes he grabs people and plays, and sometimes he doesn't like people at all. It

depends on his mood, not that there's any big struggle he has, he's not even a shy child."

He nods, then looks at Nzuzo.

"How was school today boy?" he asks.

I don't think Nzuzo wants to be here or likes his father as much as he thought.

"What did you learn?" Sboniso. He's trying to make a conversation and figure certain things out. But this son of mine isn't feeling it.

He's an expert of this though, all it takes is for him to put a couple of toys on the floor.

Nzuzo gets off Solwazi's lap and sits next to them.

"What's your favorite color?" Sboniso asks him.

“Five,” he says.

This child will not embarrass me!

“Five?” I ask him.

“Number,” he says, giving me a look that tells me I’m stupid.

“But he asked your favorite color baby, color!” I say.

He doesn’t answer, he picks a dice and throws it.

I look at Sboniso, “He’s not interested in the question.”

He chuckles, “I see.”

Solwazi has been awfully quiet, I hope it’s eating him that he couldn’t answer a single question about his own son.

“How old are you Nzuzo?” – he tries again.

“Mommy is 25, gogo is 52, Lume is 29
aaaaaaaaaand Nzu is 8.”

Okay, that was good, I didn’t even know he
knew Nkalipho and my mother’s age.

The only person not impressed is none
other than his father. Guess what, his age is
the only that Nzuzo doesn’t know. Sboniso
is only interested in Nzuzo, he’s paying no
attention to his friend.

“It’s interesting that he wasn’t getting much
professional help but he’s been improving
so much,” he says.

Solwazi clears his throat, “So is it
associated with autism or with who he is?”

What does he mean?

“Who is he?” I ask.

“A Dlomo,” he says.

Washesha bhasi!

“He’s still a Mhlongo, you haven’t paid a cent.” I’m pissed, I don’t know why.

“But his blood is a Dlomo and he carries the Dlomos with him. I think this is all because of mw, I know autistic children are not like him, that’s why Sboniso needs to confirm and ask all these questions,” he says.

Fear creeps up on me. I remember the conversation Salo and I had, I’ve tried not to think too much about it but hearing this makes me wonder what if it’s true.

“I’m not an expert on traditional stuff Lwazi, you know that,” Sboniso says.

I look at him, “Is there some you know that I don’t?”

“Boy is special, this was revealed to me after I bumped into him and had that argument with you at KFC. His grandfather wants to see him home, he has a very special gift,” he says.

Now it all makes sense.

“So you didn’t call me because you wanted to be a father, it’s his grandfather that wants him home?”

“Maka Boy,” he’s touching me.

He’s fuckin’ touching me.

“Lwazi, umntwana,” Sboniso says.

He pulls his hand, I look at Nzuzo and find him staring at us, I’m embarrassed.

“Amajita can tell you how long I’ve been talking about contacting you regarding Boy. I was scared of your reaction and what your family was going to do. When I saw him at KFC I didn’t know...”

He mustn’t dare lie to me.

“You know me, everyone who knows me will know my son when they see him,” I say.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“No, you haven’t changed Solwazi. You shouldn’t have bothered if it wasn’t coming from your heart. He was okay without you,” I’m not sure how true that is because every child needs a father.

I pick my purse, Nzuzo leaves the toys and comes to me when he sees me standing.

**“Guys, can I give a little advice?” –
Sboniso.**

**Maybe he should’ve given his friend advice
when he was denying pregnancy after
bragging to them about sleeping with me.**

**“Give it time before you co-parent, you
can’t do it while your wounds are bleeding.
Do it when you’re ready to put the child as
the first priority,” he says.**

**Obviously it’s me who’s got bleeding
wounds that need to heal.**

**He’s still trying to apologize. Nzuzo is in his
arms, I’m sensing a cry coming.**

**As we walk towards the parking lot I spot
the Hyundai Creta. I didn’t think he’d come
because he didn’t confirm. I’m happy, at**

least I won't be driven by this man back to Stanger.

“Lumeee,” – Nzuzo.

He's fighting to be let down on the ground.

As soon as his feet touch the ground he runs to the car. Not the expensive Mercedes Benz we came with. No, he's going to his uncle.

“Really Nondu?” I'm no longer Maka Boy.

“I needed a ride,” I say, smiling as he climbs out of the car in his work uniform.

Nzuzo jumps to his arms, they make their way to us.

“He should be building walls and painting, not coming here, even I left my wife at home because this was about our son, me and you.” He's angry, like he wanted to

dump me and deny my pregnancy and go get married with a woman of his dreams, while I stay miserable for the rest of my life.

Nkalipho gets closer, he's late because I wanted him to be with us through the session but I'm glad he made it anyway.

"Sanibona," he greets both of us.

I didn't expect Solwazi to greet back but he does.

"You're late," I say, smiling.

"I had a flat tyre, I'm sorry."

I don't think he had a flat tyre, he was avoiding the bitter-leaf here next to me.

*Maka Boy, I have to go," – Solwazi.

Okay, he has to take Nzuzo with him but I don't think he will agree.

"I will communicate with you about the damages and related issues," he says.

"Okay, thanks," I say.

It's awkward enough that we are standing here and they don't like each other. Why must we talk about damages, that's for our elders to worry about.

"I will pay inkomo kamama," he says.

I know it was requested but there's no need for him to say this.

"It can only be me who pays for it," he says, turning his eyes to Nkalipho.

This is petty, very petty.

"Okay, let's go," I say.

I don't want Nkalipho to get angry, I can
that he's already looking at Solwazi's feet
instead of his face.

"Boy come," Solwazi says to Nzuzo.

Nzuzo looks at me, then at Nkalipho.

No, I don't want my baby to feel the burden
of choosing between people.

"Baba will take you home," I say, getting
him from Nkalipho.

He doesn't stop looking at us, even in
Solwazi's arm.

Maybe I should've let him decide who he
wants to go with instead of trying to control
things. I hope this doesn't anger him or
Nkalipho. I don't know how I'm going to
navigate this thing.

AUNT TEEKAY

He bought her a dress. Yep, an ugly ankle-touching floral dress with long sleeves.

She's been trying not to say anything because it's a gift and the price tag is a whooping R360. She's standing in the mirror, getting ready to go wherever he's taking her. He just came and said they'll be eating out.

He's been tying his shoe-laces, when he looks up she's dressed up and looking smokin' hot.

“Wow, you look beautiful,” he compliments.

She laughs, his perception of beauty is really strange. This is an ugly dress and she looks way too old than she really is in it. He stands up and touches her curves in admiration.

“I guessed your size right,”- he’s blowing his own horn.

“The size is right, but the style and length is off,” Thembelihle says.

“No, everything is on point,” he insists.

She rolls her eyes before turning around to peck his lips.

“Thank you, I’m done and ready.” She picks her black purse and pulls off all the plugs in the room.

There's a taxi outside, the one he claims to work with doing whatever ish he's doing. He's never came with it home, only today is an exception because he wants to take her out. She's always quarantined in the house, today is Friday he wants her to let loose.

“Are we going some local or out of the township?” She's anxious.

He smiles, he enjoys being mysterious.

“Out of the township, you haven't seen the city lights in ages,” he says.

At least now she knows she's going to be the worst dress in the city, among thousands of people.

He's in one of his best moods; softly playing umbhaqanga music and dancing with his head.

They left KwaMashu to eat out in the city. She was expecting a restaurant, even if it was a half-star one, but he's parked by those women who cook in the tents by the bus rank.

"We are here," he confirms what she's been thinking.

He helps her out of the car, there's a woman wearing an apron and calamine on her face already waiting for them and calling him by name.

"I almost closed thinking you're no longer coming," the woman says.

So he booked beforehand. There are two black plastic chairs placed at the side of the tent next to the table piled with clean plates. It's neat inside, the gas stove is still on, two pots are slightly open and giving out a sizzling aroma.

“This is...” He turns to with a lopsided smile, “...Thembelihle Nkosi, the woman I've been telling you about Aunt Rose,” he says.

“I'm Rose,” the woman offers her a handshake. She's smiling, her big eyes gazing under the white face. “Finally we meet you after hearing so much about you.”

Thembelihle looks at him, smiling.

“I hope you heard good things only.”

He smiles back, “As if there’s anything bad about you.”

Okay, lovebirds are caught up. Aunt Rose takes two plates and dishes up. Khulekani asked that she cooks her best beef curry and slices of ujeqe and salads. From the coolerbox she takes two cans of cold Coke and puts everything in front of them with extra bottles of sauce just in case they need them. It’s not dark yet, it’s still just 5:20pm but she lights the lamp for them before she gives them space and goes to her friends.

“Are you okay?” Khulekani asks

She smiles, “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Let’s eat then, we still have other places to be.

The food is actually good than she thought. She's digging in without a break and sipping the cold Coke. He keeps glancing at her and smiling. He's happy that she's appreciating his efforts.

He arranged payment with Rose before they came here. When they finish eating he gives her a call to come back to her tent, they bid goodbye and get in the taxi and leave.

Their next stop is better, Suncoast Casino. They make their way in, he's holding her hand.

"Do you want ice-cream?" he asks her.

Thembelihle chuckles, "No, I just had Coke."

“Okay, we are going straight to the TVs. I thought you’d love to watch something since we don’t have a screen in the house,” he says.

A movie? That’s romantic of him. It makes up for the romantic dinner at the bus rank.

They have to choose a movie, he’s not really sure what they’re doing. Thembelihle chooses an action movie that’s still 20 minutes away, they have time to go and relax somewhere. She revisits his ice-cream offer. He’s not a lover of sweet things, he’s watching as she eats a cup of chocolate ice-cream.

“Did you talk to your sister today?” he asks.

“Yes, my grandson’s father sent people to negotiate the damages payment. He’s 8, almost 9 now, it’s one of the things we didn’t think would ever happen,” she says.

“That’s good, every child needs a father,” he says.

She’s always tried not to ask him a lot of questions with hopes that he’s going to be ready some day.

“Do you need yours?” she asks, keeping her eyes on the cup of ice-cream.

“As a child I did, not anymore,” he says.

“So what is your relationship with your parents and your siblings at the moment?”

“We are not enemies,” he says.

It's a very closed-off answer. It doesn't answer nor doesn't answer her question.

"I have always wanted to find happiness elsewhere, away from everything I know," he says.

He's in one of his rare free spirits.

"Now I want to do that with you," he says, turning his eyes to her.

She's trying not to blush, her ice-cream is almost finished.

"Let's relocate to Johannesburg," he says.

She almost drops off her seat. Moving to another province?

"Khulekani!"

He knew she wasn't just going to agree. But his mind is made up.

“Thembelihle, I have fallen in love with you,” he says it.

Words he hasn't said to any woman since his split from his first love, now his sister-in-law. He did give up, kept his heart shut for any possibilities of falling in love again. But her, she changed a lot of things.

She's still in shock. They've tried using every term in the dictionary to describe what they feel for each other, except the word 'love'.

“I haven't been this happy in a very long time, I want to be with you, to spend my life with you,” he's serious, Khulekani hardly ever fools around.

A part of her is feeling something she's never felt before. But she's scared, scared

that he's only thinking with his heart and not considering certain circumstances

But he did, he thought about everything before coming to this decision.

"If there's any reason you think we shouldn't be together, say it. But it must not be related to the kids issue," he's ate her words.

"But Khulekani you're a man," she says, defeated.

"Yes, I'm a man who wants love. If ever we feel like having kids and fail to make one of our own, we will adopt scientific methods, or whatever makes you happy."

That's too good to be true. Like how did he even consider that in his thoughts? Can any man just open up to such ideas.

**“I’m not saying let’s run to Johannesburg.
No, I will do everything appropriate and get
your family’s blessing. I respect you, I don’t
take you for granted,” he says.**

**Okay, he planned this, he knew exactly
what he was going to say for her not to say
no. Because now, why would she say no?**

“So what do you say?” he asks.

She smiles, “I say I’m in love with you too.”

**He meant...gosh, he didn’t expect that
response yet.**

**He’s on his feet, leaning over her chair and
capturing her lips into a slow, deep kiss.**

**They’re in a public space, they only realize
this after he’s shoved his tongue in her.**

**He’s a reserved person, when he sees the
attention they’ve attracted to themselves**

he's engulfed by embarrassment. His pego got excited over the kiss, he's visibly hard.

Thembelihle is amused.

"Let's leave," he says.

"No, we still need to watch the movie."

"I will buy you the big screen TV tomorrow."

"No, it's not the same,"

She just wants to see him suffer.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 58

SALO MHLONGO

I've been in so much peace since I got here. Mam' Zungu is still not well, that means Nkatha is still home and reminding me of Zothani everyday, but I've learned to live with him. There's a lot that's different between them as siblings. Zothani lit up every room he walked into, there's not a day where I don't think about him. His brother dims the room that he walks into. He's been watching some sport show where they discuss games, I think it's been going on for hours now. I had something I wanted to watch but I don't want to disturb him. So I text Nondu and ask if she's free to go out for lunch with me. I need to get out of the

house and give them space to discuss family matters without extra ears listening.

Nondu is free, I will go and pick her up from Shakaskraal. With Nokwanda gone and Bab' Zungu always sitting in the sun and watching birds, the only person I can report to is Nkatha because his mother has been sleeping since morning.

I'm actually not reporting, but informing him.

"I'm going out for lunch with Nondu," I tell him.

He looks at me, picks the remote and lowers the volume.

Then he asks, "Now?"

"Yes, now, I will just dress up and go," I say.

“Ok, I will call someone to drive you,” he says.

“There’s no need, it’s still safe for me to drive.”

“Well, I’m the doctor,” – he’s cocky, sometimes I forget and think he’s a normal, likeable person.

“My gynecologist hasn’t said anything, I appreciate your concerns but as I said, there’s no need.”

He takes out his phone and scrolls down, then he puts it against his ear. He talks to someone, telling him to come over immediately.

He’s talking to the driver regardless of what I said. Really, this man!

He drops the call and looks at me, “He will be down in 10 minutes.”

Okaaay, I breathe first, then I go to the bedroom and change my clothes. Obviously that’s his character and nobody has told him how ugly it is up to now, at his late 30s.

My phone rings as I try to fit my favorite shirt-dress that I bought just a month ago. It’s Sbonga calling, I hope she’s not ran out of anything. Sekhona survives on the same amount of money that I give her and he hardly ever calls me mid-month asking for more.

“Hey sisi,” she says.

She calls me Salo, obviously she wants something.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m good. I just want us to talk about something, I’m home.”

Home? I pay for this child to study, she can’t be missing classes like this, not so long ago they were home for the mediocre memorial service.

“What are you doing at home?” I ask.

“Mom bought a car,” she says.

I’m speechless.

“A second-hand van with scratches and malfunctioning headlights. Dad tried talking to her, I also tried and even called

malume. She's out of control, I think something is wrong with her," she says.

"There's nothing wrong with her, she knows what she's doing and why."

Obviously she's going to request more money from me. I told Zothani that she doesn't love me and he thought I was lying. All my mother sees is a money-coughing machine.

"The problem is now that she owes a witchdoctor, I don't even know him but he's been sending his people who look like zombies here to come and demand his money," she says.

"Why did she buy a van instead of paying her debts?" I ask.

“Mom doesn’t care, she says she won’t pay for muthi that didn’t work, she calls the witchdoctor names and sends threats as if she’s untouchable. I’m just sad for dad because he’s got nothing to do with all this but now his peace is disturbed,” she says.

“It’s his wife, he chose to stay with her. What you need to do is go back to school,” I tell her.

She’s quiet for a second, then she sighs audibly.

“Can’t you find her a mental institution where they can reset her brain? She’s not okay, maybe it’s depression,” she says.

Poor depression, it never rests.

Busisekile doesn't have any mental issue, her plans backfired and probably came back to bite her.

The fact that she involved me in her evil-doings makes me have no sympathy for her and her husband. Even if she was having mental health issues, I wouldn't prioritize it.

"Sbonga you have to focus on your studies, I pay money for you to be in that school. I will call you later, be in a taxi," I say and drop the call.

This has ruined my mood, I wish I can cancel lunch but Nondu is probably getting ready where she is. I continue dressing up, the driver will be here anytime from now.

NONDUMEZULU

We are in Jack Salmon, Salt Rock. Not that I'm being critical and ungrateful, but I left my rice and baked beans with mayonnaise because my rich sister promised me lunch. I get that she has cravings that aren't the similar to the ones I had carrying Nzuzo. I craved mahewu, guavas and wet soil. And she's got fancy type of cravings. The pro-max version of cravings. But come on, sushi? I don't even know how to use chopsticks, never had Chinese friends in my life. She ordered a platter of it.

"So how is it going?" she asks me.

“With me? It’s all good. I told you about Solwazi coming to pay the damages soon, right?”

She nods, “You did, I applaud him for finally growing up.”

Solwazi and growing up in one sentence? I laugh in Arabic.

“For some the grown-up hates Nkalipho,” I tell her.

“But Nkalipho is a sweet, humble guy. Why would he hates him?”

“I don’t know, he’s making my life difficult whereas I’ve been nothing but respectful towards Samantha,” I say.

I still haven’t mastered the thing of eating with chopsticks. And I hate what I’m eating, I’m going to leave space for my rice.

“What if he’s realized that he didn’t get over you and now he wants love-back? You know how men are,” she says.

“After 8 years and everything he did to me? That would be crazy. I’m happy where I am, if I had life my own way Nkalipho would be Nzuzo’s father, not him,” I say.

She bursts out laughing. I know it sounds like a bad thing to say but Nkalipho is ten times a man even Solwazi’s father was, whoever he was.

“Do you think he’d be a good father to your kids?” she asks.

“Definitely,” I confirm with a nod.

“A perfect husband too?”

I laugh, “I don’t know about that. I wouldn’t say a perfect one because he has

his flaws and I doubt I'd be a wife that makes it easy to be a good husband."

She's giving me a judging look. Look, I know how I am and how Nkalipho is. We are not the best combo but life is about finding someone you're happy with, peace isn't always guaranteed.

"Salo, that man and I still work in progress. If love was everything that's needed to make a relationship work, trust me, him and I would be perfect. He knows how to love and I don't, I'm just learning as I go. Then there's a part of trust, he's terrible at it. And I'm one person that always give people the benefit of a doubt and understand the situation before making assumptions. He loves and doesn't know

how to trust. I trust but I don't know how to love the way he does."

She nods, now she understands what I meant by us being far from perfection.

"At least you know each other, I don't think there's anything such as perfect lovers on the go, it's something you both have to work on. Just don't allow any third person into the picture, make sure Solwazi knows and respects boundaries," she says.

I can't believe I've never fought with Nkalipho over a woman. Even a woman he reacted with love for on Facebook, nothing. Not even one crazy ex.

"Isn't it weird that he comes with a clean slate when it comes to past relationships?"

She laughs, "Maybe he killed all his exes."

I choke on the thing...the sushi.

She laughs harder, “Jeez, I’m joking. Why do you look so scared? Obviously Nkalipho wouldn’t hurt a fly, he surely knows how to end things on good terms with everyone. Or maybe he’s never had anything serious in the past.”

“What are the odds though? He’s handsome, he has a nice car and money,” I say.

“Yes, and the personality you just described to me a minute ago,” she says.

Well, she’s right. I don’t need to read too much into it.

My phone beeps, it’s a Whatsapp message from none other than babydaddy.

He's sending me a picture of his face. I don't know if he was ran over by a train or someone whooped his ass. Moreover, I don't know why he's sending me the picture because I'm not his online nurse.

Then a message follows; YOUR CRAZY BOYFRIEND MESSED WITH THE WRONG PERSON.

Okay, what is happening here? I send him a text, this is the first time he's getting such a quick response from me. I want to know how his moered face concerns Nkalipho.

His next message shocks me. He claims to have been beaten up by Nkalipho. He's obviously very angry, he's not explaining much, just writing a few sentences telling me how he's going to get back at Nkalipho.

Solwazi is connected, he knows people in high places.

“Is everything okay?” Salo asks as I get off the chair.

“I need to call Nkalipho urgently.” I make my way to the bathrooms.

I’m freaking out. Nkalipho didn’t say anything to me yesterday after Solwazi made that stupid comment. I agree, he’s been coming at Nkalipho and disrespecting him ever since he found out we were together. But Nkalipho has been calm all this time, he’s never reacted to it. I don’t know what could’ve pushed him this far and where did they meet.

“Babe,” he answers.

“Hey, how are you?”

He sounds normal, like he didn't rearrange someone's face.

"I'm good. I just got a message from Solwazi," I say.

"Okay," that's his response.

"Nkalipho, did you have a fight with him?"

"Did he say we had a fight?"

Okay, this is not going anywhere.

"What happened between you two?" I ask, calming myself down a bit.

"I bumped into him, we exchanged a few words then I beat him up."

Is he crazy? Why would he do that?

"Why?" I'm just defeated.

"Because he disrespected me, you weren't there, neither was Nzuzo, so I had no

reason not to beat him up,” he says, with no hint of remorse.

So he’s been acting all this time. Does he even know that beating someone to that extent is a criminal act and Solwazi is capable of getting him arrested.

“He’s sending threats saying he’ll get you. I don’t know what that means,” I tell him.

“Give him my address so he doesn’t get lost,” he says.

Am I really speaking to Nkalipho, my boyfriend?

“I miss you in my house,” he says, jumping to another topic like what we were talking about was nothing.

“Can I come and get you later? Tomorrow I will take a day-off, we can go shopping if

you need some things before starting at your new job,” he says.

I just sigh. “Fine, you can come.”

How did things get this far? It’s like one day I woke up with a loving boyfriend, next minute the babydaddy was back and everything just went south.

I find Salo asleep on the table. Really this girl, how do you take a nap in a public restaurant full of people? I don’t wake her up, I sit and read another message that Solwazi just sent.

It reads; I KNOW WHAT HE DID.

What does he know?

I'm calling Nkalipho again. This time he doesn't pick up.

Why is Solwazi messing with me like this? I haven't done anything malicious to him.

Heck, I didn't even punish him for denying Nzuzo, I only asked that he does things the right way. I respect his wife, wherever she is she knows that.

I call him, I'm sure that's what he wanted.

"Solwazi," I say, blowing out a faint sigh.

"Mmmm," – he groans.

Is it really that bad? He's a man for crying out loud.

"How are you?" I ask.

"How I am, Nondu? You're asking me that after you've seen what your boyfriend did

to me. I'm in the hospital, that's how I am," he says, clearly angry at everything that has a name starting with 'N'.

"Can we arrange and talk about it?" I ask.

"No, he put his hands on me. The father of your child Nondu, what do you think Nzuzo is going to think seeing me looking like this?"

He probably wouldn't even care.

"I'm asking that we sit and talk about it. It's not like you're innocent Solwazi, he's never done anything to you except loving your son like his own, and you've been insulting him every chance you get," I'm being honest, he started it.

"I'm not going to sit with a killer," he says.

My stomach turns cold.

“Whaaaat?” I’m shivering.

“I told you that he messed with the wrong guy, I’m not his mother.”

I drop the call, the phone almost slips to the floor.

Nkalipho needs to understand how low this guy can go. He’s not doing this because Nkalipho beat him too hard. No, he just hates Nkalipho for no reason. I’m sure going to the hospital is one of his plans, he wants to have something on records.

I wake Salo up, I need to go to Mandeni immediately.

“Please take me to Padianager,” I say.

She frowns, “That’s far, I have a babysitter.”

Oh shit, the driver who's been coming in and out to shadow her.

“Okay, I will take a taxi, Nkalipho is in trouble,” I say.

“In trouble?” She raises her hand, asking for the bill.

I don't want to explain much, I just tell her that Solwazi got beaten and now he's out for revenge.

“We are going to take you there,” she says.

She pays the bill, we gather our purses and walk out.

The driver, slash boyguard, is waiting for us outside the car.

“We are going to Padianager to drop her off,” Salo says, almost like instructing him.

“I can’t do that miss, Mr Zungu instructed me to bring you here and then take you home before driving your sister to her place,” he says.

It looks like the plan is not coming together.

“Nkatha is not my father, take me where I want to go,” – Salo.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” he says.

Salo pulls my hand, “Let’s go and take taxis. I don’t know what will happen if taxi drivers start fighting, I will probably catch stray bullets since I can’t run, I don’t know how Nkatha would feel about that.”

We only take a few steps before he stops us.

“Fine, get in the car,” he says.

Pheew! I'm relieved.

I just hope Nkatha doesn't fire him for this.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 59

NONDUMEZULU

We are here, outside the Mnguni gate.

“Thank you guys so much,” I say to Salo and her driver.

I know the driver didn't want to come, they're probably both in trouble because

Nkatha has been calling nonstop wanting to know their location. Only God knows how he knew the car was not around Dolphin Coast anymore. I wonder how him and Salo are going to get along with his controlling ways because for the sake of the baby they have to.

“Wait, I know you’re not a wife or anything, but are you going in wearing shorts?” Salo asks.

I look at myself, damn I’m wearing shorts, my thighs are all out. It was my juvenile look for the lunch outing with my sister, I didn’t know I’d be compelled to come here by Solwazi’s threats.

I have to call Masentle. It will be better if she's alone, but if Mnguni is home I'm afraid I can't walk in looking like a hooker.

Masentle answers, "What a surprise!"

"Hey unjani?" I ask.

"I'm good, now even better that you called me."

She thinks I just called to check up on her.

"Are you home alone?" I ask.

"No. Why do you ask?" – her.

"I'm outside, wearing shorts, I want to talk to either you or Bab' Mnguni."

"Okay, you can come in," she says with a bit concern.

Didn't she hear what I said?

“I’m wearing shorts Masentle, I can’t come in if Bab’ Mnguni is home,” I say.

“Why not? I’m wearing shorts too, it’s hot outside,” she says.

My gosh this woman!

“I’m not you, he’s your husband,” I say.

I hear her sigh before agreeing to come outside with something I can wrap around my waist. I don’t think she’s ever had in-laws, Nkalipho’s aunt stays in Durban and only comes to visit. I think that’s the only time she acts like what’s expected from a wife. Other than that Mnguni just wants her to spend money and look pretty.

The shorts she’s wearing are shorter than mine, I must admit she looks sexier as well.

She's those people you mustn't bother asking what they use for their skin because beside lotions and soaps, they have skin doctors who remove any wrinkle or dark spot that appears. She's flawless, I'm not the only one staring at her she makes her way to the car. Someone is salivating as well, if Mnguni sees this he will kill someone. This driver needs to get a grip.

"Is it the stepmother?" Salo asks.

"Yes, married for almost a decade now."

This explanation is directed to the driver, he needs to know that she's married and he can't have any chance with her.

I grab my bag and open the door. "Thank you guys."

"How are you coming back?" Salo asks.

Her driver looks at her, eyes widen.

“Don’t wait for me, I will figure it out,” I tell her.

The driver looks relieved.

I hug Masentle, she came here with a long coat. It’s perfect, it covers me to the knees. I button up, nobody can tell what I’m wearing underneath.

“This is the coat I use to surprise Mnguni,” she says.

I look at her, she’s smiling. Does she mean...? Oh no, I hope they’ve never had sex on top of this coat. Mnguni is really living his best life.

As Salo’s car turns, there’s a white VW POLO coming. It slows down and pulls at the side. Salo’s driver stops too. What is

happening now? Who's the driving the POLO and why is she or he stopping Salo's driver?

No, are you kidding?

Dr Manzini, yes Nkatha himself. I didn't even know he drove a POLO, he looks so local and angry.

The driver gets out of the car too, he's explaining something.

"Who are these people?" Masentle asks.

It looks like the driver was right, he knows Nkatha more than us. They should've picked up and told him why they're here, because now it looks like World War III is about to start.

"That's my sister's brother-in-law, he must've thought the driver was taking

her...I don't know where...maybe kidnapping her," I say.

"He's dramatic," she says.

At least she's not angry that I brought chaos to her gate. We walk inside the yard, leaving the three of them arguing outside. The cars drive off before we walk inside the house. I will call Salo and ask how did all that happen.

We walk in, Mnguni is in the kitchen making cocktails. His and hers, he took a day-off to do this.

"Love, look who's here," – Masentle.

He turns around, when he sees me a smile creeps out of his face.

“Oh, the family friend,” he says.

I laugh, forgetting all the threats from babydaddy.

“How are you baba?” I ask.

“I’m okay, long time no see. Let me add you in the drinks.”

I don’t know what’s in those cocktails but it looks good.

“No Mnguni, you’re going to get her drunk,” Masentle says.

I don’t know what gave her the idea that I don’t want to get drunk, especially today.

“Her friend drinks too, so what?” – Mnguni.

Nkalipho is my friend that he’s talking about. I’ve never admitted to him that I love his son so he’s holding me to that. I

wasn't aware that Nkalipho still drinks, I thought he'd stopped.

"I'm actually here to see both of you because he's no longer answering my calls and this is not a good situation he's ignoring," I tell them.

"Okay, what's happening?" Masentle asks. She's really protective of her family.

"Nkalipho had a fight with Nzuzo's father," I'm embarrassed saying this to his parents. I hope they don't see me as a problem, they've been very accepting of me having a child while their son doesn't have one.

"Let's go and sit," Mnguni says.

We leave the cocktails in the kitchen. They look worried, it's no longer jokes and laughter.

I have to start from the very beginning. They have to know he's been very patient and calm. Solwazi provoked him, his reaction can be justified even though he beat him too bad.

“Now the problem is that I'm receiving threats from Nzuzo's father, he even went as far as digging up Nkalipho's past,” I tell them.

“What past?” – Mnguni.

I show them the message, rather than telling them.

“I'm scared,” I say.

Masentle leaves the room and comes back with a bottle of wine. She's filling her glass and taking huge sips. There's a look she's

giving Mnguni, actions are about to be taken.

“Do you know where he stays?” he asks me.

“I know, I’m just not sure he’s home yet because he was posing at the hospital two hours ago,” I say.

“Okay, let me call Nkalipho,” he stands and leaves.

Masentle is stressed out and trying to drown it with the wine.

“Can they stop him?” I ask her.

I don’t want to lose my boyfriend to jail.

“Yeah, he will be stopped and told to never snoop around about us again. I don’t even

know where he got that information. Stupid bunch of people!”

I don't know this Masentle. I thought her job was maintaining beauty in this life thing.

Nkalipho finally arrives.

He didn't expect to find me here wearing his stepmother's dress. It was too hot for me to keep wearing the coat, Masentle gave me a dress to change into. It's a white shirt-dress with a waist belt. I look good in it, I hope she tells me not to return it.

I don't know if I'm angry at him.

He hugs me and gives me a kiss in front of his parents. Unlike my mother, nobody

quotes Bible verses telling us how wrong kissing before marriage is.

“I’m hungry,” he tells Masentle.

She stands but Mnguni tells her to sit.

“We have to go and fix your mess,” he says.

Masentle is not impressed. “But can’t he eat first? He’s coming from work.”

“No,” Mnguni says.

Yes he hasn’t been answering my calls and I’m kind of mad at him, but this is my boyfriend Mnguni is depriving food. He looks really hungry; sunken eyes and dry lips.

“Let’s go,” Mnguni stands.

This is not fair at all.

“Are we coming?” Masentle asks.

Mnguni looks at us. I really want to go and see how Solwazi responds. If needed, I will tell him how this whole thing is going to affect our son.

“No, you can stay. We will just talk to him and his family, he’s still the step-grandson’s father,” Mnguni says.

Things are upside down but him calling Nzuzo their step-grandson makes me happy. Nkalipho’s eyes catch mine, he looks happy too. I hope everything works out, I trust Mnguni to talk sense into both of them. There’s nothing Solwazi hates him for and if his family stand for the truth, they will tell him this.

SALO MHLONGO

I'm angry, I feel like there's hot smoke coming out of my eyes and ears. What the fuck?!

I'm seated at the back of the Polo, I haven't said anything throughout the journey. He's a doctor, he's supposed to be intelligent but he's far from it. He was ready to fight with Gatsheni, his daughter's driver that he called to drive me. And the fact that he was quick to threaten to fire him put me off.

He's arrogant, very arrogant. I don't know how him and Zothani came from the same womb and shared looks. This Polo has been in the garage ever since I first arrived

here, I thought it was Zothani's old car. I didn't think he could've owned a Polo once in his life. It still drives perfectly and it's comfortable inside. But I still think he was being ghetto for coming in it.

He doesn't get out and open the door for me. Bloody cruella!

I open the door myself, it's a job and half.

I leave him outside and walk inside the house.

Mam' Zungu is sitting on the couch. It's good to see her not in bed.

"You're okay? Thank you Lord," she says.

These people are dramatic. Gatsheni has been driving Nokwanda since she was 12, where could he have taken me?

“We were driving my sister home,” I say, I can’t say to her boyfriend’s father’s house.

“Why didn’t you answer your phones? We were worried,” she asks.

“There was no signal,” I lie.

I told Gatsheni not to answer because I knew Nkatha would not approve of us going anywhere without his mighty approval. I’m a grown woman, I can go anywhere I want. I’m not sick, I’m just pregnant and miserable.

Nkatha walks in with a glass of water in his hand.

He sits next to his mother. “Did you take eat?”

“Yes, stop treating me like a child Nkatha,” Mam’ Zungu. She’s a typical sick adult,

without Nkatha I don't think me and Bab' Zungu would be able to make her eat regularly and take her medication on time. She leaves, saying she needs the sun. I think she just misses her husband who's been sitting outside since morning.

I let a moment pass before addressing the elephant in the room.

"How did you know where we were?" I ask.

"Who? Me?" As if there's someone else here.

Of course I'm speaking to him.

"What if you had an accident and nobody knew where you were? What was hard about picking up the phone and telling me

you'd be taking your sister to her boyfriend's place?"

"Nothing was hard, I just didn't see the need to report, I'm an adult," I say.

He exhales heavily. How come he doesn't see that he's the problem, not just here but in the whole world. Even the ozone layer is depleting because of him.

"We care about you," he says.

I don't know why that finds a special place in my heart.

"Caring and worrying about someone you care about is natural. It's too early for us not to panic when one of us can't be reached on the phone while on the road," he says.

Now I feel bad, I should've been more thoughtful.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare anyone," I say.

He nods, "It's okay, just tell me where you are next time."

"You're not going to fire Gatsheni, right?"

"No, but next time he does something like this he will be let go of," he says.

Gosh, I feel bad.

"Was there an emergency?" he asks.

This is a bit nosy but since I made him sweat I might as well just tell him the whole story.

"It's the babydaddy causing all the drama," I tell him.

“Why is the boyfriend not making things easier?” That’s very judgmental of him.

“No, Nkalipho only retaliated, he’s a cool guy,” I say.

“Maybe I’m just cooler than him,” he shrugs.

Wait, so he thinks he would’ve handled Solwazi better. Like come on, you don’t even look like you can make a good boyfriend.

He looks at me, “I can make a good boyfriend.”

One day I have to cut my tongue, I wasn’t supposed to say that loud.

But since he’s already been let into my thought we might as well talk about it.

“Why are you single?” I ask.

He chuckles, this is the first friendliest conversation we’ve ever had.

“I’m looking for someone I can settle down with,” he says.

“What kind of a person are you looking for?” I ask.

“I don’t know, I don’t have a type, just someone who will get along with my daughter and not fuss when I want to know her whereabouts,” he says.

“Just say you want someone you can control.” Again, that shouldn’t have come out.

But he’s a control-freak, that’s very obvious.

“I think men only want respect from women and it comes across as controlling. While women, the real controllers, get away with it,” he says.

I roll my eyes. Of course everything is controlled by women, even the sun outside.

“You, for example,” he says.

My eyes widen. Is he being serious?

“Didn’t you control Zothani?” he asks.

“No, I only gave him advices on what to wear when he’s going out with me, nothing like report to me where you are,” I say.

“Did you allow him to greet people?”

Oh, this is about that.

“I can’t be walking with you and you’re greeting everyone we bump into. And

Zothani would want to stop and chat to everyone,” I say.

“And why is that not controlling?”

Well, it’s not controlling but advising, women always know better. But I will let him be and just wish him luck in finding a woman to control.

I cook dinner, I’m still waiting for an update from Nondu. I want to know if they found Solwazi and if he withdrew the threats against Nkalipho. Bab’ Zungu comes to the kitchen and asks that I leave the pots and see them for a minute.

Everyone is gathered in the lounge. Today eased a lot of tension between Nkatha and I. I take a seat beside him.

“I know you weren’t here when Zothani’s will was read,” Bab’ Zungu says.

I wasn’t here, I haven’t thought about it.

“His legacy will continue, he had certain investments that will be looked over by his brother. You’re going to be looked after, even though he passed before making certain changes to his will, we know how much he loved you,” he says.

Nkatha clears his throat, “He was going to add you to his will.”

I don’t know if they think it saddens me that I wasn’t, but I’m completely okay with it. Zothani and I were not married.

“Before he died, he transferred money to me. He had asked me to be umkhongi, he

sent R250k for the bride price,” Nkatha says.

“Okay,” I nod, I’m now holding back tears.

“You have to tell me if you’re okay with me giving it to your parents,” he says.

I didn’t expect that, imagine my parents getting R250k, they’d find another witchdoctor and wipe out the whole country.

“If you give it to my parents does it mean he will be paying the bride price for me in the grave and I will be his fiance?” I ask.

He looks at his father. They look confused just like me.

“I don’t know, it was his last wish; he wanted to pay the bride price for you,” he says.

“Can I give you the answer end of the week?” I ask.

They’re okay with it.

I need to ask my uncle and MaNkosi, I trust their advices better.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 60

NONDUMEZULU

Mnguni didn’t want me to come but they realized that they couldn’t leave me behind

because they don't know where Solwazi's house is. When we got there nobody was home, so I had to direct them to his uncle's house. He's not here but Samantha is, and she has no idea what's going on. He didn't even tell her that he's at the hospital, which confirms my suspicions. He went there to make everything look dramatic and get it on records that he was beaten.

His whole family is surprised, Samantha has called him and he said he's on his way.

Now we are waiting, they were kind enough to offer us drinks.

“Nondu how is the boy?” his uncle asks.

He's his mother's brother, he supported Solwazi when he was denying making me pregnant even though he'd seen us together

a number of times, even walking into us in the room right here in this house. I was surprised that as an adult he wasn't doing anything to get to the bottom of the situation and just running with his nephew's side of the story. Nzuzo could've been not Solwazi's child, but he should've confirmed that by asking to see Nzuzo after he was born. None of them did, they didn't care.

“He's okay,” I say, not looking at him.

I don't like them, all of them. Samantha is here with her daughters. They are beautiful, obviously well-taken care of and happy.

The eldest one is a few years younger than Nzuzo but she speaks Sbonga's level of English. I know English is not a measure of

wealth but I hate that my son, Solwazi's first-born, is schooling in a public school and doesn't receive any special help as a struggling child and these two are living like princesses.

“We hope he's going to come and meet his sisters after Solwazi has settled his debts,” – the uncle.

I don't respond. I feel so bad for hating that he referred to Samantha's daughters as my son's sisters, they're innocent in all of this.

It doesn't take long for Solwazi to arrive. I don't know which hospital he was at that is so close because the closest hospital we have is 45 minutes away. He doesn't look as bad as I thought, he definitely edited the pictures. I don't know when he became

such a psycho. When he walks in Nkalipho stands. I thought we were here to make peace.

“What is this dog doing here?” Solwazi asks.

Samantha stands as well. This better be not dramatic.

“The kids are here,” she says.

I suppose to calm him down, but he charges towards Nkalipho, when Mnguni and his uncle stand it's too late. He's thrown a punch at Nkalipho and for some reason he's the one pinned against the wall now. When I see Nkalipho's hand around his throat and hear Samantha screaming, I realize that Nkalipho is actually not what I thought he was. His father is getting him

off, Solwazi is bleeding under the new bondages.

“Please stop,” my voice is faint. I’m scared of men violence.

I don’t understand how they got to this point. Surely Solwazi isn’t just fighting him for being my boyfriend while his wife is watching. He doesn’t even love me, he only communicated with me because of whatever his ancestors did to him for disrespecting Nzuzo publicly.

Mnguni manages to separate them but at this point I think everything has been ruined. This is a war, there’s no negotiating with Solwazi at this point.

“I don’t want this to be a war because there’s a young child who can be affected,

and his mother as well. I wish this can be settled out,” Mnguni says.

Emotions are still high, Samantha is trying to wipe her husband’s face.

“There’s nothing to settle out,” Solwazi says.

Obviously he’s going to be more difficult now that he’s received more beating.

“Whatever you think you have on him, it’s going to bring you trouble,” Mnguni warns him.

“Is that a threat madala?” Solwazi.

The nerve he has! He wasn’t this disrespectful growing up.

“No, just a warning, don’t go there boy,” Mnguni says.

Solwazi's uncle steps forward. I hope he doesn't blindly just take Solwazi's side, like he usually does.

"What is this about?" he asks.

Nobody answers him. Then a woman walks in, she's related to Solwazi, they have a striking resemblance that can't be missed. It could be his aunt, the one who killed her husband for inheritance.

"What is all this noise?" she asks.

Samantha quickly finds her seat. The uncle steps back.

Maybe this is someone who can finally put this to rest.

She greets, then looks at Mnguni.

"Melusi," she says.

Mnguni looks confused, like he doesn't know who she is.

“Don't tell me you don't see me, I'm Nonhlanhla's sister,” she says.

I see Mnguni taking a deep breath, his slow nod tells me he's finally remembered her but he wasn't expecting this encounter.

“Is it your son who beat up my nephew?” she asks.

Yeah, it's Solwazi's aunt, another one on my hate list.

“He's your nephew?” Mnguni asks.

“Yes,” she responds.

There's a moment of silence.

Then Mnguni asks, “Where's Nonhlanhla?”

“She's no more,” she says.

Okay, I think there's history here.

“Makoti clean him up,” she instructs Samantha.

Solwazi looks a bit disciplined with her around, he follows his wife and they disappear in one of the rooms. Now it's us, the uncle and aunt.

Nkalipho sits next to me. I still can't believe that we came here to make peace and he almost strangled Solwazi to death. I wonder what would've happened if it was just the two of them with no one to stop the fight.

“When did you come back?” the aunt asks.

Mnguni doesn't look comfortable, I don't think he expected seeing someone from his past.

“Years ago,” he says.

“And you didn’t bother checking how she was, where she disappeared to and all?” she asks.

“I’m married,” Mnguni says, clearing his throat.

“To his mother?” she looks at Nkalipho.

Hhayi-bo this woman, why so many questions? Everyone is quiet and listening to this conversation.

“No, his mother passed on,” Mnguni says.

“Oh, so you married another woman. Are you surprised that we are here? I live across the street, we moved from Mangethe after Nonhlanhla’s death because there was a lot happening in regards to the

inheritance Solwazi had gotten from Manana,” she says.

“Manana, his father?” Mnguni asks.

The uncle just clears his throat, I can't read the aunt's reaction. They don't confirm Manana's relation to Solwazi. I know that Solwazi had a rich father who owned a big farm and died when he was still very young. He was born rich and being the only son meant he inherited everything, and his maternal family built everything they have from him. Well, the aunt is rich with her own inheritance now after her husband's mysterious death. It's weird that they had a taste in rich, soon-dying men.

The uncle stands, he looks rather pissed at his sister than Mnguni and us.

“Nobody has ever listened to me!” he says, walking away.

The tension is so thick, you can cut it with a knife.

“We have to talk Melusi,” the aunt says.

She takes a deep breath, “This can be sorted out, it’s just deeper than you think, it goes down to their umbilical cords.”

Now shut the front door! Whose umbilical cords? Because it can’t be Nkalipho and Solwazi, their identities have no relation.

But that’s not something the aunt wants to discuss now. I have a lot of questions...

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I don't know what's going to happen, we are leaving without resolving anything. I have more questions than answers. I sit at the back, Nkalipho sits at the front with his father. I'm not comfortable because they're angry at each other and I know how Nkalipho is when he's angry. I wish Masentle had come too.

"Mnguni don't start the car," he says.

Lord, not in front of me! I'm sure his father would like to discuss what happened in private.

"Let's go home son," he says, calmly.

"How do you know Solwazi's mother? Was she the reason you abandoned me and my mother?" – Nkalipho.

"She happened before your mother..."

Nkalipho interjects, “Did you stay with her in Durban?”

A heavy sigh!

“Yes,” he says.

I’m not even sure where to look, this is very weird, I shouldn’t be part of this conversation.

“Is he your son?” Nkalipho asks.

“I don’t know but Nonhlanhla said her son wasn’t mine. She had him early in our relationship, we took a break because of various reasons. After some time I saw her again, we continued discreetly, the baby was living with his father’s family. But we broke up again when I moved to Doringkop, I met your mother and had you. I had to find a job and provide for you and

your mother, unfortunately things didn't go as planned, I met Nonhlanhla again. I was still just a boy and your mother was difficult to have a healthy relationship with, and I still believed in the love that Nonhlanhla and I had once shared. I was stupid, I kept wanting to try, I ended up destroying what was more important in my life."

"Did you know Solwazi? Was he around when you and his mother were together?"

Nkalipho has a lot of questions and the timing is off. His father has explained more than he should have.

"No, I never met him, the child lived with his father," Mnguni says.

He's very patient with his son, if it was my mother she would've told me to butt out already.

“So it was just two negligent parents fucking? You had left me in the shacks with my mother and she left her son with his father as well.” Nkalipho is getting out of hand.

I clear my throat, “Can we go?”

“Is there any possibility that he could've been yours?”

This guy!

“Nkalipho!” I'm appalled.

His father has said enough, he still needs to respect him regardless of whatever situation. .

Finally, Mnguni starts the car, we leave.

As far as I know Solwazi's mother had him with the rich farmer who left his legacy for him. Mnguni has Nkalipho and Sphiwe only. I don't want to think there's a possibility that I have fucked brothers.

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MASENTLE

I don't know why nobody is telling me anything. Nkalipho went to his house and switched his phone off. He's with Nondu, I don't know if they've sorted out their

issues. He had a fight with her babydaddy, that's not something normal.

This man walks in with the towel wrapped around his waist. He's my husband, I've known him for almost a decade but when he closes off his emotions I still don't know how to get through him. He came back and asked for food, then he was locked in his study for hours. It's 11pm and he's only coming to bed now.

He thought I'd be asleep, he looks surprised.

"Why are you not asleep?" he asks.

I don't respond, he knows how worried I get when anything threatens my family. I was involved in everything, I have my name somewhere on records, I personally

paid off people and made deals. This is not between father and son, if the babydaddy decides to continue with his digging I will be in trouble as well. This thing is deeper than just Nkalipho accidentally killing his mother, other people died too, they had to. If he goes there he'd be opening a can of worms.

He leans over and kisses my cheek. I'm not moved by it.

He unwraps the towel and leaves it on the floor, then gets in the bed behind me.

He smells good, I'm addicted to his shampoo. His hands are cold but I let him hold me.

“Why are you not asleep?” He repeats the question, nibbling on my neck with his lips.

I stay calm, not responding because he knows very well that he owes me an explanation.

“Mayo,” he says.

He wants sex, that’s how he calls me when he’s horny. I push his hand off. I’m not in the mood, I want an update and it looks like I’m suddenly being excluded from this matter, by both Nkalipho and him. But he holds me again and kisses my shoulder. I feel his hard erection, his heavy breaths tell me it’s lust and stress.

“What happened?” I ask.

He sighs heavily behind my neck. I hate that his breath on my skin arouses me. His hand is on my hip, massaging all around to my butt.

“I’m going there tomorrow again, without the kids,” he says.

“Why without the kids?” I ask. This is about Nkalipho, why is he going back and leaving him behind.

“It’s a long story but I will sort it out, I promise,” he says.

“How did that boy find out about this in the first place Mnguni? We destroyed everything and shut everyone up, didn’t we?” I ask and attempt to turn. I want to look at him, I want him to see how angry I am. But he stops me, he pushes my shoulder forward and throws his heavy leg over my hip.

“I will sort it out,” he keeps saying.

“What is his fight with Nkalipho about? It can’t be Nondu, he left her for a very long time and even got married,” I ask.

“It’s just boys being boys,” he says.

“Huh?” I’m shocked by both his statement and the gentle-giant sliding between my butt-cheeks.

He kisses the back of my neck and wraps his arm to my boobs and fondles my nipples with his hand.

“Mnguni, we are still talking,” – my voice is faint. I’m saying this while allowing him to lift my leg up to access my moist-castle.

He slides his giant over my clit and then drops his hand over it. It’s my clit, his gentle-giant and his hand on top. He moves it up and down on my clit, balancing his

hand over it. With each gentle rub my
castle moistens.

“I made a lot of mistakes mkami,” he says
with heavy breaths.

I don’t know how to split my focus between
what he’s saying and what he’s doing.

“I just want you to know that everything
that’s happening is because of my gods and
forefathers. I’m going to need your
support,” he says.

This sounds deep but...I’m wet.

“Talk to me Mnguni,” I say, drowning a
moan in my chest.

He pulls out and moves his hand back to
my breast. He tweaks my nipple a few
times then gently directs his giant into my
opening.

“In time mkami, for now please allow me here, I need this.” He’s pushing into the depths of my core, within two pushes he’s all in and groaning behind me. When he’s stressed you feel it in his thrusts, he’s pounding me a little too hard. He’s bigger than me, with each push I’m sliding closer to the edge of the bed.

“Mnguni, I will fall,” I cry out.

His mind is not in control, he doesn’t slow down, I slide off the bed. Fortunately I was able to get balance once I got to the floor.

He climbs off holding his juicy-coated giant with his hand. Oh gosh, what unleashed the beast!

I kneel before he makes me. Stomach on the floor, ass up in the air.

He penetrates me again, he's got it all spread for him.

"Mayoooo!" He's enjoying, I love it when I break all his stops.

"Yebo Mnguni, talk to me," I say, moving my ass back to him.

"Mnandi umsele Ma, mnandi!" His voice trembles.

I feel him pounding side to side, then slowing down and pushing me all the way to the floor.

Then he spills inside me, he makes all the noises during sex but not when he cums. I always know when he slows down and goes silent that he's finished.

He lies on my back, breathing hard.

Then he says, “Ngonile mkami, I have wronged the Dlomos.”

I didn’t expect him to talk now. But I guess he needed to chow before opening up.

“The boy could be my child,” he says, sliding off and lying on the floor next to me.

I turn and look at him, “Which boy?”

“The Dlomo boy, I was involved with his mother and we had some unresolved issues.”

Somebody tell me this is a joke!

“How?” I ask.

“It was before and between Nkalipho’s mother. I’m so sorry, I know this is not how you want to find out about your husband’s past,” he says.

It's too early and too late for apologies.

"Mnguni tell me you're joking," I say.

He drags in a deep breath, looks at me and doesn't say it.

"So the boy who's threatening Nkalipho and digging into our past could be your son?" I ask.

"Yebo mama," he nods.

I get up and take the towel he left on the floor. I wrap it around my waist and go to the bathroom. I close and lock the door. I don't want to see his face, all along I was confident that I know my husband.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 61

NONDUMEZULU

I thought I'd wake up and leave in the morning, but it's now 11am and I'm still here. I have made breakfast, only Nzuzo and I ate. Nkalipho fetched him last night from my mother's house. I love that thoughtful side of him. He knew I'd feel bad if I left with seeing my son. Nzuzo was excited to come here too. He's been sitting in front of the TV the whole morning, watching cartoons. I have cleaned the house, I hope my Facebook friends never find out about this, I'm one of those who

always post that men ain't shit but I have taken even his laundry out. I'm handwashing the green uniforms, if this doesn't make me a wife material I don't know what will.

I feel hands on my waist, I almost jump. I didn't expect him, how did he come up to me so quietly?

“Can we talk?” he asks.

I turn and look at him. It doesn't look like he's taken a bath, he's a mess.

For the first time last night we slept without him either asking for a blowjob or a quick round. He just held me and slept. We didn't talk about what happened with Solwazi's aunt, and to be honest I'm shit scared.

I dry my hands and follow him inside the house. We head to the bedroom, the bed is still not made, he sits. I lower myself next to him.

“Have you talked to your father?” I ask.

“He called, requesting to see me,” he says, evidently stressed.

“Is he coming from the Dlomos?” I ask.

He nods and starts popping his joints.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

He turns his face to me, his left cheek is reddish, he slept badly on it.

“I’m scared Ndume,” he says.

I hold his hand, I’m also scared because whatever the aunt knows will affect Nzuzo.

“I can’t and I don’t want to live without you. We have our ups and downs but I cannot imagine living my life with anyone else but you. I don’t think I’ve ever loved a human being the way I love you.” He’s looking at me, wearing his heart in his words.

“I just want you to promise me, you’re not going to let anyone or anything to break us apart. Because I don’t care what happened and didn’t happen, I’m not going to stop loving you and Nzuzo,” he says

I hug him, I wish we can dissolve our fears and pain together. I want to share with him whatever baggage he has in his heart.

“I love you baby, nothing is going to change that,” I tell him.

He grabs my neck and turns me for a kiss. I kiss him back, he's sad and I hate seeing him like this.

We are kissing with our eyes open, he's not shy to be sad and staring into my eyes. I love him for being emotionally accessible.

"You're handsome," I say, breaking the kiss.

He blushes and shifts his eyes away. It's even cute that he doesn't know how to react to compliments. I kiss his cheek, he smiles with his eyes dropped.

"Go and hear him out, we will take whatever life throws at us," I say.

He nods. I hope life doesn't throw shit because we've already been through too much with our own issues as a young

couple trying to merge their worlds into one. Can't we get a break?

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NKALIPHO

He's always known that he'd find love and he'd do everything different from his father. He just didn't know he'd be so dangerously in love that whenever something threatens that love he slowly loses his sanity. His heartbeat is rapid, he's been feeling it since he woke up. He knows a panic attack, he knows how to calm his thoughts and stay conscious of his triggers. He walks in and

joins his father and Masentle on the table.

That drum-roll on his chest again!

He sits and hides his hands under the table.

“Morning,” he says.

Masentle is looking at him. “It’s 11:30 and you are still wearing your sleeping shorts and looking like you haven’t touched water. Have you eaten?”

“Nondu made breakfast,” he says.

“Have you eaten? That’s my question,” – Masentle. Sometimes she can be very extra.

“I’m not hungry yet,” he says.

He looks at Mnguni, can’t he just say it and free him?

“Baba,” he says.

Mnguni exhales heavily, “You surely took your time. Nkalipho, I don’t appreciate you wanting to address issues with me in front of your girlfriend.”

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” Nkalipho says. Nondu was angry about it as well, he surely crossed the line.

“I’m not sure how you’re going to take this,” Mnguni says.

His hands start trembling under the table. He’s tapping his foot on the floor restlessly.

“There were issues after Solwazi’s father’s death, the Mananas raised them and suspected that he wasn’t theirs. So they ended up asking for a paternity test, that’s when his aunt intervened and stopped them and moved him away with all his

inheritance as everything was left on his name. She says Nonhlanhla had told her something before she died,” Mnguni says.

He can already tell where this is going, but he’s still hoping for another explanation.

“Nonhlanhla got pregnant from me but I wasn’t working, I was very young, I didn’t have a stable background or money. So she decided to tell Manana, whom she only had one sexual encounter with, behind my back, that it was his baby. It worked out because the boy ended up getting everything and growing up comfortably.”

Masentle sighs and sips her glass of wine.

“I know you might hate me for this, but Solwazi is your brother,” Mnguni says.

There it is. Maybe it's moments like this when people see their lives falling and breaking into crumbs right in front of them. He wouldn't have cared if he wasn't involved with Nondu, but now it's a whole new dynamic.

"What does that mean for me?" Nkalipho asks.

"His mother never married, he's regarded by the Dlomo ancestors. But I don't think Nzuzo has been lost either, he's very close to you and he likes it here. You're Nzuzo's uncle by blood," Mnguni says, smiling.

There's a possibility that he might never have a good relationship with Solwazi but the fact that he's already in Nzuzo's life, his first grandchild, is comforting.

“So it doesn’t mean him and I are that related? He’s regarded as a Dlomo and me a Mnguni?” Nkalipho asks.

“Blood is blood, he’s still your brother,” Mnguni says.

“That doesn’t change the price of bread,” Nkalipho insists.

“It changes a lot of things. I know you love Nondu but I think it’s better that we found out before you and her took things further. She’s your nephew’s mother, you can’t...not in your state, I don’t want you to live like that,” Mnguni says. It’s morally wrong of Nkalipho to be with the mother of his brother’s child while he’s still alive. And Nkalipho is the way he is, Solwazi may become a huge part of the family and it

won't be a comfortable situation for Nkalipho. He gets triggered easily and he fights, Nzuzo can't grow up witnessing them fighting over his mother. Solwazi doesn't want him to be with Nondu, he didn't want their relationship before he even knew they could be brothers. It will be a mess, Nkalipho can find another woman, a free one.

“Nondu is not just Solwazi's babymama, you can separate her from that title. And there's nothing I can't handle baba, I promise,” he says.

Mnguni looks at him with sympathy. “Son, I want you to be happy. I don't want you to constantly fight for being a loving person, I don't want you to be always emotionally

broken and trying to compete. You're a horrible competitor, I don't want you to live like that."

Nkalipho stands, "I don't care, I'm not going to break up with Nondu for any reason."

"Son, we have to think without being emotional," Mnguni.

How does he expect him not to be emotional whereas his love life is concerned? He's centered his whole life on that love, it defines who he is, he can't just let it go.

"You can be his father, I will go and look for the Hlophes, then we'll reverse my surname. I'd choose Nondu over

everything, even being a Mnguni, your son,” he says.

Mnguni is left dumbstruck. The Hlophes don't even like him because of how their daughter died. But he understands the overreaction, that's just how Nkalipho is. And he might even become worse if Solwazi, as Nondu's ex and babydaddy, gets close to his father and stepmother. He's not going to be comfortable.

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NONDUMEZULU

He comes back with bloodshot eyes. I told him we were going to be okay no matter what, I don't know what has upset him like this.

“We should go out for lunch,” he says.

Ok, that's not what I expected him to tell me. He walks past me to the bedroom without my response.

I hear the shower running, I don't know if I should warm his food or make peace with the fact that he hasn't eaten anything since morning.

He comes out of the bedroom dressed up.

“Should I take the Ford? Nzuzo likes it,” he asks.

“I'm fine with any car,” I shrug.

He nods and goes to the door. I don't know why I'm not saying anything, he owes me answers.

He stops at the door and looks back at me. I don't show any emotions, just staring at him with my arms folded. He rubs his nose and comes back to me.

“He's my father's son,” he says.

I literally feel ice in my stomach. Couldn't Mnguni be someone else's father? I feel weak, how will I explain it to Nzuzo when he's old. Your stepfather is your uncle? Does that even make sense? My mother will definitely tell me to end this relationship, it now looks morally wrong.

“I still love you and I will always do,” he says.

I hug him and inhale a deep breath. Why is this stressing me? Fuck DNA and Solwazi's mother for lying about paternity.

"I love too babe," I say.

He lifts my face and kisses my lips.

"Don't worry, if Mnguni wants him to change his surname from Dlomo to Mnguni, I will go and change mine back to Hlophe," he says.

Now that's extreme, and I know he's capable of making such decisions.

"I want to ask something from you, I know it's going to be a big thing to ask for, but I've thought about it and I have a plan," he says.

I look at him curiously, "What is it?"

He exhales sharply and holds my waist.

“Nondu let’s make a baby,” he says.

I’m shocked, how can he ask me that,
we’ve talked about this.

“Are you serious right now?” I ask.

“I don’t want people to keep thinking
you’re just Solwazi’s babymama. If I have a
baby with you as well then him and I will
have equal rights to claim you.” Nkalipho is
crazy with capital C.

“You want to have a baby because of
imaginary rights?” I’m shaking with anger.

He tries to hold me, I push him off.

“Mnguni wants me to let go of you because
you have a baby with Solwazi. If I also

have a baby with you he won't have any ground to..."

I'm not listening to this! In fact I want to go home, I'm taking my son and leaving. He needs to take time to reflect on what he wants from me. Him and I had plans, Solwazi's presence shouldn't threaten him because I don't rate that man anything. Tomorrow is my first day at work, I don't want to go there stressed and thinking about making babies to prove a point.

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SALO MHLONGO

I sit and do nothing everyday. I should enjoy it, there's a new helper who comes on weekdays from 9am to 4pm, I don't do any chores except making myself food and changing TV channels. I found myself on Facebook reading beautiful love stories and I was mesmerized when I read about couples who met on dating apps. I thought Nkatha could find his other half there, most people there know what they want and they're ready to settle down. There are beautiful, successful ladies looking for love. Not exactly handsome I'd say, but he's tall and dark and monied. He's going to have a lot of messages coming through.

He's just taken a bath coming back from work. He makes his own food, that's another quality ladies would love, he's not lazy. His meat looks good, I should make one for myself and make it crispy like that.

"Ask Dora to make you food," he says.

Damn, was I staring at his food?

"No, I'm not hungry," I say.

Zothani was right about him being likeable once you get to know him. He's really not a bad person, I actually enjoy being here even more when he's back from work. I don't get bored.

"Have you ever heard of Tinder?" I ask.

"I don't know, it sounds familiar though," he says.

“Well, it’s a dating app. I’m making a profile for you, I want you to find your other half,” I say.

He chokes down a hard laugh. I didn’t even know he had a sense of humor, even though I’m not joking right now.

“I’d rather go to the airport,” he says, still laughing.

“People have found love on dating apps. You can meet career-driven women who are ready to settle down. Very beautiful and educated, and the best part is that you choose from hundreds, pick your match and go on a date,” I say.

“No,” he bluntly says.

I knew he’d be difficult, he’s not really that modernized.

“But I’ve wasted my data, please just give it a try,” I plead.

He sighs, “Fine, but I’m not marrying a desperate woman I found on dating apps. I don’t want an easy woman.”

His demands are almost unrealistic, where is he going to find a submissive yet difficult woman? But it’s whatever, I’m glad he’s giving me permission to create his profile.

“Do you have pictures where you’re smiling?” I ask.

He frowns, “Smiling at what?”

“People smile, it’s natural. Also, women love men with beautiful smile.”

He shrugs, “I don’t know, check my pictures, my phone is on the counter in the kitchen.”

I get his phone and go through his gallery. None of his pictures give 'I'm a fun person', he looks like a professional asshole in all of them.

"Can you take a selfie smiling?" I ask.

He gives me a look, "Now you're pushing it!"

Well, I have to choose from the ones I have. I only know his year of birth, I put the wrong date, he will verify that to whoever he meets. I don't want to ask him a lot of questions, lest he tells me to drop the whole thing.

I know what women like, I upload five pictures. At least he has the famous hand and expensive watch on the steering wheel picture. Even though I can't find a picture

of his smile, there's one where he was out with friends, at least it shows that he has a social life.

“What are you looking for beside someone who will listen to you?” I ask.

“She must love you and Nokwanda,” he says.

I don't think that's something I can write on his profile if I want to attract women. It sounds like he comes with a baggage and nobody wants that. I finish profile and go to the kitchen to make a snack. By the time I come back he's already found a few matches.

“You have a match,” I say, giving him my laptop.

He stares at the screen, eating.

“I’m still eating, I promise I will chat and do whatever.”

Ok, I’m annoying.

I need to find myself another hobby.

I’m clearing the table after dinner. Mam’ Zungu was okay before dinner but a few minutes into it she started crying about the pain in her chest. They’ve went to bed, her and Bab’ Zungu. I do worry about her, we are still mourning, I don’t think anyone can handle another funeral. I haven’t healed but I’m in an environment that allows me to heal, I haven’t heard anything about my parents this week, I’m at peace.

“That Lerato wants to meet tomorrow before she leaves for Joburg on Friday,” Nkatha says, coming back from the bathroom.

“Really?” I’m excited about this. He gave the app attention, I didn’t expect it.

Lerato is a civil engineer from Rooihuiskraal, she was in Ballito on vacation. She matched with Nkatha, they have similar interests and they both love Sci-fi movies.

“Yeah, we will meet her after work,” he says.

Now say what?!

“We?” I ask.

He frowns, like I’m the confused one.

“Yes, I don’t think Nokwanda can make it because she’s in Durban with her mother,” he says.

“Bhut’ Nkatha, you can’t bring a sister-in-law to a first date,” I tell him.

“Why not?” he asks.

He is...at this point the only attention Nkatha needs is psychological attention.

“Because nobody does that, you can’t come with family to a first date. You’ll be there to get to know her on a personal level,” I say.

“And how exactly will your presence stop that? It will be raining tomorrow, prepare warm clothes,” he says and grabs the empty jug of juice and cups and goes to the kitchen.

I think the dating app thing was a mistake, now not only will he look weird, Lerato will automatically assume that both of us are the birds of the same feather.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 62

NONDUMEZULU

I hate that Nzuzo is here and now witnessing this fight. He wants to stay and watch the big screen TV and eat his packs of danone and chips. But I want to go

home, I don't see how Nkalipho thinks for me whenever he makes his plans.

"It's unnecessary for you to just leave instead of hearing me out," he says.

I look at Nzuzo, he's standing with his backpack confused.

"Go and watch TV, I will tell you when we leave," I say, brushing his head.

He walks off, I can tell that our fight has affected his mood.

Maybe I need to explain to Nkalipho where I come from and what situation it is, again.

Maybe I have to explain to him like I'm explaining to a 5 year old whose brain is still in developmental stages.

"Nkalipho, I don't come from a financial stable home. I don't have a car, my mother

sleeps in the same bed she slept on 5 years old. It has holes in it, there are bricks balancing it up. My father's grave doesn't have a tombstone, nobody afforded it.

When I buy a pack of meat I have to divide it into small portions and count days so that nobody cooks extra pieces and one day we go to bed hungry. Nzuzo likes it here because our DSTV doesn't have all the channels that kids love, I don't have Netflix at home. My mother can't work, Nzuzo is a child, I'm all that they have. I'm my mother's only hope in life and I've disappointed her enough already. I have other priorities outside of this relationship, I don't have a rich father and a fleet of cars."

“I know baby,” he says, attempting to cut me.

Yes, he knows, but I don’t think he understands.

“Tomorrow is my first day at work, I haven’t gotten even my first paycheck to make my family happy, and you’re asking me for a baby?” I’m trying so hard to stay calm and not scatter him to pieces as I itch to.

“I have a plan, I will take a leave and raise the baby, Masentle will help me as well. I promise you are not going to be disturbed from work,” he says.

“I don’t have 9 months to spend pregnant, that’s the point. I don’t want a baby, when I want the baby I will have one and bond

with it as a mother, I will not let anyone raise it for me,” I say.

“Nondu please, if I was able to carry the baby myself I would have. Beside everything else, I do want to have a family with you,” he says.

I’ve said enough, he would’ve understood if he wanted to.

“I will take a taxi,” I say.

“Sthandwa sami please, I feel like I don’t have any meaning to you. I don’t want my father to think that Solwazi...” That’s his problem, Solwazi.

“I don’t want to hear his name,” I grab my bag from the floor and go to the lounge to get Nzuzo.

He was okay when he was just complaining over little things and demanding attention. But playing exactly on Solwazi's cards and feeling the need to compete with him exhausts me. I need to take Nzuzo home and go prepare for tomorrow.

"Can I drive you home?" he asks behind us.

"No," I say.

I don't want him to keep begging me to give him a baby.

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NKALIPHO

Mnguni walks in shortly after Nondu left. He's standing in the middle of the kitchen, looking absent-minded. Mnguni shakes his head and grabs a chair to sit.

“Why are you not taking them home?” he asks.

Nkalipho goes over the sink and runs water for nothing. He doesn't want to have a conversation while looking in his father's eyes because what has happened is exactly what he said was going to happen.

“She didn't want me to drive them,” he says.

“Why? What did you do?” Mnguni asks.

He shrugs, “Nothing.”

“I know you, she wouldn’t just leave and walk with a child to the street to hike if everything was okay,” Mnguni.

He closes the tap and exhales.

“I asked for a baby,” he says.

There’s a moment of silence, Mnguni is staring at him, his back is still turned.

“It’s just day one and you’re already doing it. I told you are not going to be able to handle the brotherhood and relationship of this dynamic, I didn’t say what I said because I don’t want to see you happy,” he says.

“But Nondu is what makes me happy. How can you ask me to break up with her?”

“Okay, don’t,” Mnguni says.

He turns and looks at his father.

“You said you will handle it, right? I was just trying to help you,” Mnguni says.

“By telling me to break up with the babymama of your son from the love of your life?”

“Don’t start again, please son,” Mnguni pleads.

Nkalipho looks at him, he’s angry about a lot of things, including the fact that he’s Solwazi’s father even though he can’t change it.

“You loved his mother, that’s why I’m like this,” he says.

“Nkalipho, I can’t change the past, I asked for your forgiveness and tried to do right by you,” – Mnguni. He stepped up, even

though it was a little too late, he even got Masentle involved to help them rekindle their relationship.

“But you loved his mother more than my mother, that’s if you even loved my mother. And you loved her more than me, it’s always easy for you baba to choose everything but my peace and happiness. Nondu and I were okay before this,” Nkalipho says.

Mnguni sighs, maybe he shouldn’t have come here.

“Don’t blame me for how you run your relationship,” he says.

“If you didn’t tell me to break up with her and started doubting my strength, I wouldn’t have felt like my love is not

enough and it won't stand against odds. You know my weaknesses better than anyone, you pushed my insecurities purposely and now I could lose her."

"If that brings you peace, then okay it was me, everything is my fault. I have to go and see the boys," Mnguni pushes back the chair and stands.

"Mnguni you're also insecure, that's why you're married to someone younger than you and not allowing her to work because she will meet her agemates and leave you," he's taking the wrong turn with his tantrums.

"Ungangijwayeli kabi Nkalipho, don't you dare mention my wife!" Mnguni is shaking.

“Yet you can throw your two cents in my relationship, now do you understand how it feels like when someone constantly reminds you of your fears?” – Nkalipho.

“I don’t fear nothing, you can do whatever you want, I don’t care.” He goes to the door, Nkalipho is still barking behind him, he walks out and slams the door hard. He made a promise to himself that he’d never put his hands on his son because his mother did a lot of that and damaged him. But that has given Nkalipho a pass to say whatever he wants and expects no consequences.

Masentle takes one look at him walking through the door and stands.

“What happened now?” She’s back to where she was 9 years ago, always putting out the fire between these two.

“Nkalipho doesn’t see me, I’m not the cause of his manhood problems,” - Mnguni.

She rushes and closes the door. At least Nkalipho is not here, he didn’t hear his father say that.

“Mnguni you cannot say that,” she says.

“No, I have been too soft on him, now he thinks I’m his friend.” He looks at

Masentle, he’s livid. “When does it end?

The walking around egg-shells and minding

words as to not hurt his fragile ego. I’ve

had enough, he wants to be treated like a 2

year old, umdondoshiya omdala kangaka,

never!”

“Do you need a drink?” Masentle asks.

His emotions are still high, it will make things worse if she tries to intervene. She will let him cool off first, then they can talk about it calmly.

“I don’t need a drink, I want to get to work,” he says.

She nods, “I will take out your clothes and run a bath for you.”

She gives him a kiss and heads to their bedroom, leaving him pacing up and down.

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NONDUMEZULU

I left because I wanted to have peace of mind before tomorrow, but damn all I'm thinking about is Nkalipho and his stupid request. He wanted a baby and I told him why I didn't want to have one for now, I even gave him a timeframe of when we could start trying, and he easily agreed. We were on the same page, I was ready to do all that I need to do at home in a space of two years and then start a family with him and marry him. Trust me, I wouldn't back out, in two years I will give him a baby and whatever he wants. I just need him to be patient, we don't have the same backgrounds. It's easy for him to prioritize love above everything in his life, less like me who has to fulfill my family's wishes first before doing what my heart desires.

I feel a little hand tapping on my shoulder, I take my eyes off the window and look at him.

“Where is Lume?” he asks.

He knows that Nkalipho stayed behind, he was even happy to get in this taxi asking if we are going to gogo. What is this now?

“Lume is in his house, we are going to see him tomorrow,” I say.

He stands up, I gently pull him back on his seat. The taxi is full, everyone is seated down.

“Baby sit,” I say in a hushed voice.

“No, I want Lume,” he says.

Okay, deep breath. I take out R10 from my purse, he loves notes.

“Here,” I give it to him.

He grabs it and throws it away.

“I want Lume!” he raises his voice.

I hear someone exclaiming behind me.

**People don’t ask questions, they always
assume I’m a bad mother who lacks
discipline and fails to control a child.**

**“We are going to see him tomorrow, sit.” I
pull him down.**

**He kicks and stands again. This child better
not do this to me in a full taxi!**

**“Why don’t you hit him? Spare the rod and
spoil the child,” someone says behind me.**

**Can she shut the fuck up? I don’t need
parental advices right now.**

“Nzuzo,” – I have put everything down, I want to get him on my lap and try the soft strategy.

He’s having none of it.

“I want Lume!” he keeps screaming.

Now I see why they say keep your children out of your mjolo. I wasn’t even sure where Nkalipho and I were going, yet I let him have this strong bond with my son.

Knowing how Nzuzo is, I should’ve been more careful about how much I let Nkalipho be in his life.

He’s been screaming and kicking, the lady beside me has been trying to help me. Then I hear something crack, I lift my eyes and see that he kicked and broke the taxi window.

The taxi halts to a stop. I want to scream because I know from the way the driver got off his seat that it's about to go down on me. He checks the window outside, then opens the taxi door.

“Come and see what your child has done,” he demands.

I'm not sure whether to take my bags with me, taxi drivers are not patient and understanding. He won't get it, even if I try to explain.

“Look at this! This is what happens when you discipline kids by making them in the stupid corner. I cannot take this taxi to the owner looking like this,” he says.

“I'm so sorry bhuti, I don't even know what to say.” Nzuzo is still screaming, now that

we are outside the taxi he's lying on the ground and kicking his legs.

“Uyabona lento yokuphambanisa izibongo zezingane zishiselwe impepho ewrong!” the driver says, he's using every opportunity to insult me. Nzuzo is not acting like this because of paternal issues.

“Call his father or your blesser, I need this window fixed,” he says.

“How much is it?” I ask.

“I don't know, I'm not the one who's going to fix it,” he says.

I hear some people yelling and complaining inside the taxi; they want to go.

“Sisi, passengers are in a hurry, call the father of your child,” the driver.

I call Nkalipho, he doesn't answer. Ok, we had a fight. I have no other choice but to call Solwazi, there's a chance that he's around Mandeni.

He answers; "Maka boy."

"Hi, can you come to the taxi rank in Mandeni? Nzuzo has kicked the taxi window and the driver wants it fixed today," I say.

"Okay, I will be there," he says.

I exhale in relief. I've never counted on him for anything, I didn't think he'd agree to come without any hesitation. Maybe he's ready to be a father for real.

"He's going to come at the rank," I tell the driver.

“Good!” he says and turns to Nzuzo, “Hey vuka mshana, ungabe usakhahlela amawindi sekuzoholwa iqolo.”

I think wherever they learn to drive they’re also taught how to be cheeky and rude for no reason.

I pick Nzuzo up and get back inside the taxi.

My phone rings.

It’s Nkalipho, I thought he was ignoring me.

“I just saw your call, I’m sorry I wasn’t close,” he says.

“Nzuzo kicked the taxi window, but it’s going to be sorted out at the rank. I shouldn’t have bothered you,” I say.

“Does the driver want it fixed?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Okay, where is Nzuzo?”

“Here, listening to me with tears in his eyes.”

“Please give him the phone,” he says.

I pass the phone to Nzuzo, he doesn't take it.

“He doesn't want to speak,” I tell Nkalipho.

“Okay, I will come there now,” he says.

Oh no, that can't happen.

“It's fine, I've sorted it out,” I say.

“Just wait for me at the rank, please.” He drops the call.

Now this is going to be a mess, Solwazi is also coming to have a talk with the driver, now him too. The last time they saw each other hands were thrown.

The taxi arrives in town, before we even park Solwazi calls. He wants to know where I am, he's already here, he wasn't far from town. I direct him and wait next to the taxi, I don't want the driver to think I'm planning to run away.

Solwazi appears shortly, Nzuzo moves from me and goes to him. I didn't expect that, he wasn't liking him the other day. Solwazi picks him up, the driver is coming behind them.

“Dlomo don’t tell me this is your son,” he says.

Solwazi turns, “He is. Are you the crying taxi driver?”

The driver laughs, “Me crying? No.”

Why is he acting like he wasn’t ready to leave me and Nzuzo on the road?

“It’s not a big damage, if the owner wasn’t a fussy person I wouldn’t have requested a compensation,” he says.

“Don’t sweat, I will get it fixed, don’t scare my boy,” – Solwazi.

He laughs and pokes Nzuzo’s cheeks.

“Lutho Dlomo, let’s talk later because you’re still with your son, I’m still here.”

He gives me a thumb, “Sure sistera.”

Talk about being fake, he wasn't this nice before finding out whose child Nzuzo is.

"Where are you coming from?" Solwazi asks me.

"We were at Nkalipho's place," I say.

"Is boy not supposed to be at school?"

"He is, but I wanted to see him," I say.

"And play happy family with your clown while jeopardizing his future?" He's really not the one to give me a lecture about how I should raise my son. He knows nothing about putting a child first.

"And you didn't jeopardize his future for 8 years?" I ask.

"Please don't do that, let's go to McDonald's," he says picking Nzuzo's bag

and throwing it over his arm while holding him with the other. I take my bag and follow.

We get to McDonald's, he orders for himself and Nzuzo. I'm not hungry, even if I was I wouldn't have allowed him to feed me while I'm coming from my boyfriend's house. I should ask about the Mnguni issue but my emotions are still scattered, he will address it with his family and then tell me who Nzuzo really is. My phone rings, it's Nkalipho.

I feel like I'm burying myself in a big hole. I shouldn't have assumed that he wasn't answering on purpose and jumped on to call Solwazi. But I tell him I'm at

McDonald's and truthfully tell him that Solwazi is having lunch with Nzuzo. I have nothing to hide, I just don't want them in the same space because they fight.

"Nkalipho is coming here," I tell Solwazi.

He sighs, "Does he really need to always be around?"

I don't answer that, Nkalipho is not crossing any boundaries, he's not the annoying one.

I have my fingers crossed, may the fact that they share a father stop them from causing a scene.

Nkalipho walks in, Nzuzo stops eating his burger and yells his name. He's excited to see him here, much to the irritation of his father next to him.

I stand and give him a hug. We are not on good terms but I don't want Solwazi to see that and rejoice. I kiss his cheek and sit down.

"Did you sort out the taxi issue?" he asks.

"Yes, Solwazi did," I nod.

He looks at Solwazi, "Thank you."

This is very kind of him.

But Solwazi is never grateful for anything coming from him.

"It's my son and his mother, no need for you to thank me for doing my duties," he says.

I want to roll my eyes to the back of my head. Can't he be nice to Nkalipho for once?

“I want us to talk,” Nkalipho says to me.

I rub his arm, smiling.

“We will talk,” I say.

“Thank you, I really didn’t mean for things to happen the way they did. I was wrong to ask what I asked at the time that I did. I know and understand everything you said,” he says.

I’m trying to give him the signs that I don’t want to have a conversation in front of Solwazi. Now he knows that we had a fight, he’s listening.

“It’s fine babe, thank you for coming,” I say, faking a smile.

Nzuzo saves me by wanting him to look at his balloon. Solwazi no longer cares that he’s bonding with his son right in front of

him over the balloon that came with the meal he paid for. He's just happy that there's trouble in paradise, I'm trying everything to look happy and in love.

Nzuzo goes back to his meal, leaving his balloon in his Lume's safe hands.

I hear him releases a deep sigh, then he looks at Solwazi.

“Look, I know you don't like me. I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry for putting my hands on you regardless of everything that transpired before that. You're a married man and a father, I shouldn't have put your kids and your wife through that bad experience. For that I'm really sorry.”

I didn't want him to apologize, not that I support violence. But Solwazi did things to

him too, he should be the first one to apologize and own up to the part he played.

“I met her because of Nzuzo, I fell in love with both of them. I don’t want to have a beef with you, I will never on your way, I just want love and peace. And my love and peace is them, I know my place as far as Nzuzo is concerned,” he says.

He’s doing a lot of explaining and Solwazi is just staring at him.

“I’m sorry if I gave you any impression that I...” Nkalipho needs to stop now.

“Must I order for us?” I ask loud.

He looks at me, I disapprove with my eyes, he can’t keep apologizing.

“I thought you were not hungry,” Solwazi says.

“Now I have the motivation to eat. Let’s go and order,” I take Nkalipho’s hand.

I hate that Solwazi is feeling like a boss now that he’s received an apology.

We stand in front of the kiosk.

“Why did you do that?” I ask in a hushed tone.

“I want the situation to be pleasant and us to be okay,” he says.

“Let’s talk about it, just not here. Stop apologizing to him, he’s not a key to our relationship, don’t make yourself look stupid and desperate,” I say.

He exhales and says nothing.

From a roller-coaster to another. I know he gave me a son, but can Solwazi die? He’s

**making my boyfriend's life horrible,
purposely so.**

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 63

NONDUMEZULU

I walk Nzuzo to the gate and ask him to tell his granny that I'll come in a few minutes. I still want to talk to Nkalipho. Solwazi had no grounds to fight with him today because he apologized. The asshole didn't accept nor reject the apology. He enjoyed being

bowed to and then bought Nzuzo a ridiculous car toy and promised to fetch him from school tomorrow.

Nkalipho has been down, maybe he needs more assurance that I'm on his side.

I sit, he's leaning back on his seat and staring outside the window.

"You're a good person, you know that, right?" I say.

He turns his head to me and doesn't say anything.

"You don't owe anyone an apology, especially not Solwazi. I don't want you to let him walk all over you, in fact I'm happy you beat him," I say.

He chuckles, however his eyes are still aligned with sorrow.

“I would love to do it again, but he’s Nzuzo’s father and I want to be in Nzuzo’s life for eternity,” he says.

Maybe I don’t count my blessings, I dwell on other sides of our relationship and disregard how loving he is, especially to my son. I don’t know if there’s any man out there who would love a person and their child like he does.

“Do I tell you that I love you enough?” I ask.

He chuckles, he’s slowly wearing off the sadness.

“No, you don’t,” he says.

“Well, I do. I love you and I’m not going to let anyone make you feel like you don’t deserve what you and I have. I was not

easy to get, you begged me for weeks and went out of the way to prove that your intentions were pure. I finally let my guard down, there hasn't been a time where you don't show me how much you love me. In my whole life, I've never felt like someone has my back. And I've never felt so emotionally close to a person, like I get sad when you're sad, your happiness means everything to me. So I don't want you to feel like having a baby is what going to make us make sense, because we already make sense. We don't need anything else validating us. In two years I'm going to give you a baby and whatever you want, even if it's moving in together and having sex on the balcony every morning."

He smiles, "I'd love that."

“Please stop rating Solwazi. He happened in the past, when I was still just a child. I don’t even know if I ever loved him or I was taken by his R25 chocolates and pizzas,” I say.

His eyes widen, then he laughs out loud.

“Don’t tell me you slept with him and even fell pregnant because of pizza!”

“And the Golf he was driving,” I say, shaking my head.

He laughs harder. It’s good to see him laughing after the morning he’s had.

“You’re an embarrassment, child,” he says.

I laugh, I’m not the only girl who gave her virginity away because of goodies. Nzuzo is the only reason why I don’t regret those years. I don’t think without him I would’ve

held on all these years. Maybe I would've killed myself.

“I'm serious, if it wasn't for Nzuzo I would've probably forgotten that I was ever involved with him. He's a non-factor, don't even think his sudden presence is going to change something between us. You've spoiled me too much for other men, I don't even think there's any man who qualifies to be my boyfriend other than you,” I say.

He drops his eyes, blushing.

“So please get it out of your head that someone can take me away from you. Or that we are going to break up if we don't have a baby, I want you to believe in yourself, you're enough for me,” I say.

He nods, “Ngiyabonga, your words mean a lot to me. I hate that I get insecure and end up pushing your buttons. That’s why I want peace, right now I don’t care what happened and didn’t happen, who did what and when. I just want to make peace with everyone and focus on my future.”

“That includes apologizing to Solwazi?” I ask, giving him a look of disapproval.

“It includes everyone, my mother’s family and my dad as well,” he says.

His dad???

“Okay, what did you do to Mnguni?”

He exhales heavily, he looks guilty.

“I said things I shouldn’t have said.

Masentle is a good wife, she’d never cheat

on him and I shouldn't ever include their marriage in my fight with him," he says.

I don't know what pushed him to say those things, I can't comment.

*Masentle has my back, unlike Mnguni. He loves me but I don't think he has my back. I don't know if he would've come back if I didn't kill her," he says.

I think we are taking an emotional turn now. I know one can never fully heal from the things that played a role into a person he became, but I don't want him to go back there. His relationship with his father is great to watch. He's just angry, Mnguni has his back.

"I don't think he would've come back," he says and draws a sharp breath.

I hold his hand and look at him. He avoids locking eyes with me.

“I don’t think the house is still there, but I know her cousin is in Greytown. I want to go and ask for forgiveness. I want to have a relationship with them and just have peace in my life.”

“The Hlophes?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he nods.

I don’t know why he’s on this apologizing spree, but whatever he wants, I have to support him.

“Okay, I will go with you,” I say.

“Really babe?” He seems shocked.

“Yeah, but can we make it Sunday at least?

This is my week to shine, tomorrow I’m

going to a new job and I want to focus on that for a moment,” I say.

He smiles, “Okay, you can have your spotlight, this week was supposed to be your week. I should come and sleep over actually, so that I can drive you to work in the morning and bring you pizza for lunch. Who knows, maybe you will reward me with something soft and juicy.”

Oh gosh, why did I tell him that? I’m rolling my eyes as he laughs.

“Had you told me this earlier I wouldn’t have chased you for a month, just a slab of chocolate and pizza, viola!” he says, laughing.

He’s annoying, he’s not getting a kiss.

“Bye!” I open the door and climb out.

“What time are we leaving?” he asks.

“We?” I look at him.

“Don’t be angry, I will buy you pizza,” he says.

“I will call you, idiot!” I close the car door, he’s laughing.

He waits until I walk through the gate then drives off.

My mother is outside the door fixing her old gas stove. She’s always trying to fix it and it hasn’t worked for almost 3 years. It’s just one of those things old people don’t want to throw away because there’s no similar brand in stores anymore.

“You’re fixing this stove again?” I ask.

“Yes, since I can’t fix my daughter’s behavior I’m fixing the stove,” she says.

It’s one of those days where she remembers that umjolo is wrong for her religious self.

Nkalipho didn’t park too close, I don’t know what’s going on with her.

“Are you well?” I ask.

“Yes, I didn’t expect you home so soon, Nzuzo said you will bring him late,” she says.

I ignore her, I don’t want to tell her about the ins and outs of my relationship. At least Nkalipho and I sorted things out.

“Solwazi said he will pick Nzuzo from school tomorrow,” I tell her.

“That’s good, I will make sure everything goes okay, I don’t need you calling and

worrying while at work on your first day,” she says.

“I won’t, but if he doesn’t bring him home on time call me,” I say.

She gives me a look. “I will handle it. Do you still know what you have to do in your job?”

“I studied for it and passed Ma,” I say, laughing.

“That was years ago, don’t get there and start asking patients if they want plastic,” she says.

I laugh harder. How will that even be possible? It’s two different working environments, I can’t confuse it with being a cashier.

“I won’t mess it up but do pray for me,” I say.

We get inside the house, I need to see what she cooked and eat, I’m starving.

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SALO MHLONGO

I still don’t think this is a good idea but we are here. The weather is good, it didn’t rain as we expected. I was able to wear my new bohomo dress and sandals. I look casual, beautiful and very pregnant. I had to put my foot down when he wanted to come here wearing his washed-out jeans. He’s

wearing a white T-shirt and black fitted pants, he still looks like his serious self but there's a glimpse of a fun personality his style gives.

We are meeting in a restaurant, I picked it for them. We are here before Lerato, he's not even bothering to check what's keeping her. I order a drink for myself, he waits for her before ordering anything.

"Your sister started today," he says.

"Mmm, how was she?" I ask.

"She's okay," he says.

I know she couldn't excel on day one, but his answer is still too flat for me.

"Her boyfriend was bringing lunch and flowers," he says with a tone I can't comprehend.

It's as if he was annoyed by the gesture.

"During work?" I ask.

"No, during her break. But it was unnecessary," he says.

Okay, I don't know if I'm sensing jealousy here, which confuses me furthermore.

"Nondu deserves it. She deserves the kind of love Nkalipho is giving her. He's a great guy, may not come across at first because of his quiet nature, but his actions speak volumes about his personality. It's not easy to find someone whose life hasn't been perfect but they're still able to love with their whole hearts." Gosh, I just went on full defense mode.

And he's just looking at me like nothing I said recorded or made any sense.

“Please let him be, they’re still celebrating her getting a job,” I say.

“So you’re their cheerleader?” He’s grinning.

“No, I just know how much they love each other and want to be together. They’ve faced enough challenges in their separate lives and together. Nzuzo started having a father figure through him. It’s more than just a relationship for two, everyone around them is connected,” I say.

He shrugs, “I hear you, maybe I’m just not into cheerleading. And I believe one should explore before getting marked by just one guy.”

Ok, now I see it.

“You want Nondu?” I ask in a low whisper.

It's such a shame that I'm only noticing this now when Lerato is on her way.

He grins and doesn't say anything.

"Jeez bhut' Nkatha, it doesn't mean she's compatible with you just because she fits into what you call a hard-to-get," I say.

He chuckles, I don't know if he's just teasing because I'm their defendant or seriously wanting to pursue Nondu regardless of Nkalipho's presence.

"I would hate to see you do that. Honestly, she's been through a lot, she needs peace.

And Nkalipho is not someone who likes competition. There are people you can have fun messing with their emotions, but Nkalipho is just not one of them. This is one good thing he has going for himself.

And your brother liked him, so don't." I think he just wants to play with Nkalipho's emotions for the fun of it and he doesn't deserve that. I mean, would he like it if someone came and pursued Lerato?

"Nondu is still young, men will see her, he must be ready for competition," he says.

"I take you as my big brother, can it be not you?" I ask.

He sighs, "Okay, I didn't say I was going to pursue her anyway."

"But do you even like her or you think she's a sport?"

"Whatever answer I give, you won't like it," he says.

Well, it's better we leave it then. I've almost finished my drink and Lerato is still not here.

"Can you check where she is?" I ask.

He sighs, like it's an extreme chore picking his phone and calling her.

Before he brings the phone up to his ear, I see her entering the restaurant in a red dress and blonde wig. She looks like a superstar in real life.

"Is that her?" Nkatha asks, his voice kept low.

She's looking at us as well, a bit confused but making her way to our table.

I don't know what's going through Nkatha's head, he's staring at her.

We both stand, I'm smiling like an idiot,
she's so beautiful.

"Hi," that's Nkatha.

She smiles, standing with a straight pose on
pencil heels.

"Nkatha, right?" she asks.

"Yes, thank you for finally coming."

I hope he doesn't make much of a fuss, he's
very disciplined, time is a big deal to him.

"I'm sorry, getting ready took longer than I
thought," she looks at him, smiling blandly.

"Hi," she says to me.

"Hey, I'm Salo," I say.

"My sister," Nkatha adds.

She looks at him, "Oh you came with your
sister?"

I knew it was going to be weird.

“Yes,” his voice is firm, like he wants no further questions on the matter.

He pulls the chair for her, once she's seated he waves for the waiter.

The awkward silence, yeses!

I don't know if I should break the ice or excuse myself. Nkatha doesn't like her in person, and the fact that she came late made things worse, he's gritting his teeth and looking at everything but her.

“So you two stay together and there was no one to look after you at home?” she asks me, smiling devilishly.

Nkatha is not my nanny.

“No, I just wanted to meet you,” I say.

I'd love to say fuck her, but I'm not that person.

She smiles, deceitfully. Only if she knew that I'm the reason she's meeting this man and he's still sitting on the same table as her because of me.

"How was work?" she asks him.

The heavy breathing, Lord!

"It was okay," he says with a slight shrug.

I clear my throat and take out my phone and look at it.

"You look beautiful," he says.

That took long enough for him to say.

"So do you like KZN? Would you permanently move here?" he asks.

“I like it. Permanently moving here? I don’t know, maybe if I find a good reason to,” she says.

“I don’t do long distance relationships, so if this works you’d have to move here,” he says.

“Oh, wow!” She doesn’t sound that impressed.

I wouldn’t be impressed either, Nkatha needs to tone it down a bit.

“How old is your child again?” she asks.

“She’s 19, I’m ready to be a grandfather,” he says, chuckling.

I’d like to think he’s joking but I wouldn’t be surprised if he allowed Nokwanda to have a child if she wants one. Whatever Nokwanda wants, Nokwanda gets, even if

it goes beyond what's normally acceptable in the society from father and daughter.

“Now she's about to have a little brother,” he says, glancing at my tummy and smiling.

She turns her eyes to me, shocked.

“His brother's,” I explain.

But I think she's getting more confused and turned off.

“So you're not his biological sister? Wow, what am I doing here?”

“I asked her to come, she wants me to find a woman,” he says.

Bad choice of words! Somebody get me out of here.

“So you are not looking for a woman? It’s her idea,” she asks, clutching her purse and preparing to stand up.

“Yes,” he says.

“Bhut’ Nkatha!” I look at him. He could’ve lied to save the date.

I look back at Lerato, “I suggested the dating app, he is looking for a woman. Can I excuse myself and go to the bathroom?”

What I really want is to go home. I take my bag and leave them with their tension.

I’m going to pee and powder my nose and do whatever I can to take longer.

I call Nondu while standing in front of the bathroom mirrors.

“Hey sisi,” she answers.

“Hey, I’m sorry I didn’t call to check on you. How was your first day at work?”

“Scary but okay,” she says.

“How was it working with Nkatha?”

“I don’t work with him, I saw him two or three times.”

“And...?”

“And what?”

“What do you think of him Nondu?”

“He’s not nice, but he’s paying me,” she says and laughs.

“Did he say or do anything?” I ask.

“No, nothing in particular,” she says.

“Good!” I glance at the mirror, behind me is Nkatha standing.

I quickly drop the call. Wtf is he doing here, inside women's bathroom?

"Hey," I turn, my face guilty of the gossip I was in the middle of.

"Are you done? Let's go," he says.

I pack my bag and wash my hands.

"I was going to come back," I say.

"It's been over 5 minutes, I was worried," he says.

"But what does she think? You're even inside the girls' bathroom." I follow him out, people are giving us weird looks as we go.

"She's left," he says with a shrug.

"I'm not surprised," I say.

He chuckles and leads me back to the table.

“I need ribs,” he’s pulling the menu.

I look at the one in front of me. I want everything that’s here.

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An hour later we are headed back home.

The date was horrible but at least I got to eat two different desserts after my expensive meal. I’m eating left-overs of the last one I had before leaving the restaurant.

“I’m never doing this again,” he says.

“Going to a date with me?” I ask.

“No, going to meet someone I’ve never met on a date,” he says.

Then he glances at me briefly before taking his eyes back to the road.

“Delete that profile,” he says.

What’s going to become of my hobby now?

As we drive through the gate I notice a white van parked in the yard. I don’t pay much attention thinking it could be Bab’ Zungu’s friends.

Nkatha carries my bag and the leftovers I insisted on taking home.

I walk in behind him, he abruptly pauses and looks back at me.

“I knew it,” the voice I recognize as Busisekile’s says.

I take a step forward, shocked and confused.

“They’re turning my child into a wife, passing her from one son to another.”

Oh gosh, not this! I didn’t anticipate coming to this.

“I should get lobola for raising her, don’t you think?” She’s glaring at Nkatha.

Mam’ Zungu is sitting on the couch covered with a blanket. Bab’ Zungu is next to her looking clueless. They don’t need this drama, not when Mam’ Zungu is this sick. I don’t know the uncle on the single-seater, I think he’s her driver, he’s quiet and staring at his phone. How did my dad approve of this van nonsense? She’s gallivanting with other men.

“I’m not being turned into anyone’s wife. Me and Nkatha went out for his date with Lerato,” I say.

His parents seem shocked as well. They didn’t know where we were going.

“She’s lying, look at him holding her brother’s pregnant girlfriend’s bag. I need my lobola,” Busisekile insists. She’s on her feet, in front of Bab’ Zungu, disrespecting his house.

“Ma please, nothing is happening,” I’m embarrassed.

“No, no, no. It’s fine my baby, you’re young and pregnant, he must take over his brother’s place and keep you warm in bed.”

Say what now?

She's smiling within a split second, looking at me with admiration.

“Stay where the money is. Unlike me who has to stick with your father and his two red underwear my whole life,” she says, boldly shaming her husband.

I'm dumbstruck.

“I will go to the mountains and pray for you two to fall in love,” she says like she knows anything about praying. She looks back at Mam' Zungu on the couch, “Rest in peace sisi, don't overthink it, we are all going to die and follow.”

“Ma, are you out of your mind? How can you say that to a sick person?”

“I'm not being insensitive, I just don't think she's going to make it here, maybe in

heaven she will be healed, and that's fine."

She looks sympathetic, her face is the complete opposite of the kaak she's spewing.

Bab' Zungu looks hurt, I don't even know what to say.

Nkatha's arm gently pulls me back.

"It's okay," he says in a low whisper.

Nothing is okay, he's mad too.

"We are happy to see you Mrs Mhlongo, it's good that you came to see your daughter, she was missing you," he says.

I swear Nkatha needs to shut up, when did I say I miss her?

"Really?" She's smiling.

“Yes,” he says and turns his eyes to me.

“Please ask Dora to make tea for them.”

I had peace, I’m staying here because I want nothing to do with them. Why is she here? Why is my dad not keeping his insensitive witch of a wife under control?

I grab the chair and sit as Dora boils water for tea.

Nkatha walks in shortly, he looks at Dora and she quickly dismisses herself.

“I don’t know your mother well, but something is not right,” he says.

“I don’t care,” I say.

He exhales heavily, “I’m not asking you to care, but she doesn’t look mentally okay and needs help.”

“I’m not a therapist,” I shrug.

This is the same thing Sbonga was bothering me about. Knowing how Busisekile is, this is probably one of her stunts, she’s not mentally ill.

I hear a loud laugh, it’s hers. I hope she’s not laughing at Mam’ Zungu.

“Allow me to get her mental help, for the sake of your father and siblings,” he says.

“So after everything she did to me you’re just going to get your friends to declare her mentally unstable and probably put in an institution to live her life without consequences of what she did?” My eyes are burning with tears. How is this possible?

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 64

NONDUMEZULU

He's here, spending the second night. I had my first day at work, it went better than I expected even though I was nervous. It also helped that he showed up for my lunch with a bunch of flowers and yes, a pizza. It was weird to other staff members because instead of eating lunch with them and getting to know everyone better, I was in my man's car. I'm not sure if there was a

problem, Salo dropped the call before giving me the gist. She wouldn't just asking me about Nkatha for no reason, she must've heard something.

"I want to get to work 10 minutes early tomorrow," I say.

"Okay, we will wake up at 5:45," he says.

"Are you going to work tomorrow?" I ask.

"No, I will see next week," he says.

I doubt his father approves of this leave. I don't want it to look like he's missing work because of me. We can both go to work and be together later.

"Did you talk to him?" I ask.

"No, I didn't see him, only Masentle was home."

“Did you apologize to her?” I ask.

“I did, she’s cool. I don’t know about Mnguni, I’ve tried to call him with no avail.” He’s clearly bothered by it. He’s still the only parent he has. I doubt they had any recent fights before Solwazi.

“Where was he?” I ask.

“He was at the Dlomos,” he says.

He’s been down the whole evening, I noticed it when he came to fetch me from work. Nkalipho hates competition of any sort because deep down in his heart he believes that he’s hard to love because of what his mother did to him. It becomes difficult for him to be at peace when he’s an option because he doesn’t think he can be easily chosen. Mnguni knows him better

than I do. I understand that he has to do what's right by the Dlomos, he's not doing anything wrong. But he should keep it in mind that Nkalipho doesn't always share what other people would call a normal perspective of things.

"You're adorable," I say.

I'm on the bed seated, he's lying down and I'm caressing his head.

He raises his eyes and cracks a thin smile.

"What's up with you and compliments today?"

"I'm naturally like that," I say.

He chuckles and drops his eyes again.

He's swallowed by his deep thoughts again.

“Have you gotten any contact of your Hlophe relative?” I ask, breaking the silence again.

“No, but I will get her number and call her before we go,” he says.

“I can’t wait, I think you will find some closure and give them some as well. I don’t want you to be like this. It weighs down on my spirit,” I say.

He puts his hand over mine and caresses it.

“Mnguni is going to forgive you and talk to you. You guys have a special bond, let him cool down,” I say.

“Mmmmm,” that’s all he responds with.

I’m not sure if my advice is accepted or rejected. He looks sleepy, his sex drive has dropped. Nkalipho wouldn’t just doze off

next to me without snagging twice or more. I don't like initiating, I hardly do, it made things easier when he was still a horny bull everytime he saw me.

I slide under the duvet and wrap my hands around his waist.

“Hey,” I'm not that horny, I just want his attention.

“Mmmm,” he slightly opens his eyes and then closes them.

“I miss you,” I say.

He smiles with his eyes closed. “I'm here baby.”

His hand comes to my cheek and caresses it. It's a weak caress his hand drops within a minute.

I slide my hands under his boxers and grab his dick. He doesn't move or open his eyes, I massage it slowly. We've shared the bed the most this week, yet we haven't done anything, he doesn't attempt to even in the mornings.

"You're weird these days," I say to him.

"Why are you saying that?" He slightly opens his eyes.

His dick is thickening in my hands. His hand on my arm tells me he's enjoying the massage.

"Since when you sleep without touching me?" I ask.

He smiles, "I want you to rest and go to work fresh and active."

"Did I ask you that?" I ask.

His eyes fully open, he's still sleepy but now horny as well.

“I have a lot on my mind, not that I don't want you. You know how much I love having sex with you,” he says.

I take my hands out of his boxers and hold his waist.

“Share those thoughts with me, let's do a pillow talk,” I say.

He inhales a sharp breath, “I don't want to go back to my drinking habits. I don't want to set a bad example to Nzuzo. But alcohol used to help me cope with self-harm thoughts. Sometimes I think and come to a point where I can't think beyond pain. It feels like being in a dark hole that you can't get out of, even if you do find your way

back to the surface there's just nothing for you there.”

My heart is constricting. I have noticed him not being his usual self, but I didn't think it was that bad.

“When did you start having those thoughts?” I think my best response would be to stay calm and not panic. Right now he needs me to understand him, not to kick him when he's already down. Even though I'd love to, he can't harm himself and leave me alone after teaching me to depend on him so much.

“The Solwazi dilemma. It wasn't out of character, he brought back the side of me that I hate. He proved to me that I didn't

resolve any of my issues, I only buried them,” he says.

“But beating people is not your character, right?” I enquire, staring at him.

His silence is grinding on my tits.

“Nkalipho?” I raise my voice.

“I have done it a few times in the past. I have a criminal record for it, Mnguni had to intervene and pay this other particular family off,” he says.

“Why though? Did they start you as well?” I ask.

“I don’t like feeling threatened, I used to protect myself by attacking and it didn’t get me anywhere. I swore I’d never put my hands on anyone again when this one

person who was in my life requested half a million from Mnguni,” he says.

“Was it a female?” I’m not comfortable with this pillow talk anymore.

“Yeah, I found her with a man in our rented house. One of the reasons I’m staying across the road from Mnguni’s house and treated like a mental case,” he says.

“So I’m not the first woman you rent a house for? And you’d beat me if you came here and found a man?” This is not supposed to be a fight, but I’m perplexed.

His eyes lock with mine in a brief stare. I notice the red rims, just a second after asking that question.

“I don’t understand your question,” he says, his voice rumbling.

“Would you beat me too if something like that happened?” I ask.

“But why would you do that to me? I always tell you that if there’s something you’re not happy about let me know. I won’t always take it well, but I prefer to know why my woman is not happy than to be turned into a fool. I don’t know everything and I don’t excel in every area of life, I don’t think there’s anyone I’ve shared my vulnerability with the way I’ve done with you. I’ve never taken anyone to the place where I grew up and last saw my mother at. I love you in more than one way, I love you in ways I never thought I’d ever love a woman.”

His tongue is smooth, when he confesses his love I don't see beyond his eyes. I even forget that I was mad at him for beating that woman, whoever she was.

“I knew best how to love you when you were a single mother. I knew how to protect you, I wanted to do for you what nobody did for my mother. Sometimes you didn't give me a chance, and I'd hold back and not do as much as I wanted to. There's a part of me that's scared of you because of the way you talk sometimes. Not that you can beat me up or anything...” I laugh at the last statement even though my heart is broken.

“But now that you're no longer a single mother, I'm struggling to find my priorities.

I don't know what my place is going to be, especially with Nzuzo. That's the only part I can agree with Mnguni at That's the only part I can agree with Mnguni at, I'm still going to struggle a lot with Solwazi's presence in your life now that he's going to be a permanent part of our lives," he says.

"I think that depends on which role you want to play; stepfather or uncle," I say.

"I don't know, I just want to be a man who has his back, someone he can always trust to be there for him. I don't want to park outside his school to pick him up and hear that his father's Lamborghini has already taken him."

I roll my eyes, “He doesn’t have a fuckin’ Lamborghini. The stolen inheritance doesn’t make him the richest in town.”

“Stolen inheritance? Hhayi-bo baby.”

“Was it not stolen? His mother and aunt had gifts of attracting rich men who die quick.”

His eyes widen. “The aunt we met?”

“Yes, she wasn’t traditionally married, like no lobola was paid for her. But she took the man to Home Affairs, they signed without his family knowing. Boom, next three months the man is gone. Like dead, we are singing ‘amagugu’ and eating salads.”

He’s laughing so hard that tears are coming out of his eyes. I don’t know if he thinks I’m lying but that’s exactly what happened.

That Dlomo family is what's wrong in the planet.

"I'm glad their little girl children are related to Nzuzo, because wow!" I say.

"But women are the same everywhere," he says.

"I'm not like them, my mother is not like them, Salo is not like them, Sbonga is not like them and Aunt Teekay is not like them," I defend my family, making him laugh even more.

"I'm kidding babe, I know you're a hardworking woman," he pulls me to his chest.

Then he kisses my lips and stares into my eyes adoringly.

"Thank you," he says.

“For?” I ask.

“The talk and not judging me.”

I smile and kiss his lips. Now I can put my hands back inside the boxers and get my stick of joy.

He’s smiling, “You don’t want to sleep today.”

“I want you to put me to sleep,” I rub my hand down to his balls.

He hisses sharply and locks his lips on mine.

He drops them down to my neck, it gets sensitive there I’m moaning.

His hand slides between my folds, I’m dripping wet.

“Damn baby, why didn’t you tell me you’re this starved? Mmm?” He’s kissing my lips again, his fingers are dipping into my opening.

“I thought you no longer like it,” I say.

He drops his face over the side of my neck, drawing his breath through his teeth.

“I love pussy baby, don’t ever think for me.” He rubs my clit and makes a sound when I release juices. My body is vibrating, I don’t if what I just had was a little squirt, he sticks his fingers back to my opening and rapidly stirs them. I release more juices and dig my fingers into his shoulder as my whole body shakes. I really needed his touch.

“Shit baby, can I not use the condom just for this round only? You’re on birth-control, nothing is going to happen.” He kisses me, I’m down to anything, as long as he puts his dick inside me.

“I love you Ndume,” I feel his tip teasing my opening.

I close my eyes...

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I didn’t get to work early, consequences of three rounds of sex. I wasn’t late though, I heard that in Dr Manzini’s books lateness is a bigger sin. I work under supervision, that means I run all the errands; cleaning equipments and collecting samples and

testing, then submit for review before Dr Manzini receives the diagnosis, if there's one. My scrubs are bigger than me, I need to ask if it's wrong of me to buy my own. The first patient is here for a foot sore, I don't know how long she's had this sore, it's taking all over her heel. I put my nitrile gloves on and join Dr Manzini in the consultation room. It's a bit awkward when I have to be in the same room as him, it feels like I know him personally whereas he should be just a boss.

I put on a straight face as I check the sore. It's disgusting, I don't think I will be able to eat breakfast. She's in pain, I get a groan everytime I touch her foot. I need to run a blood glucose test because Dr Manzini wants to check her diabetic levels.

“Don’t fuckin’ pinch me,” she squirms.

I let go of her foot and sigh.

“Be gentle,” Dr Manzini says.

I hate that she used ‘fuck’ with me, I’m not her maid. It’s going to be challenging, most of his patients are white grannies who never stop whining.

“I’m sorry, can we try again?” I say.

She shuts her eyes and lies back on the pillow.

Dr Manzini looks at me and smiles. I think she’s one of his difficult patients, not that he faults me for getting frustrated.

This is not an easy job, it’s lunch time and I have no appetite. The old white woman’s

foot sore was nothing to the vaginal sample I just worked on. I'm trying to distract myself by going through Twitter trends, I don't want to think about Nkalipho because that would affect my day at work.

Someone drops a bottle of Ensure in front of me.

I look up, it's Dr Manzini.

"Hectic day?" He's sitting with me.

"No, I'm fine," I say.

He smiles. So weird, he's alright not smiling.

"Drink that for energy, I know it's all still just new to you."

"Thank you," I uncap the bottle and take a sip.

The sore...

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I fake a smile, forcing another sip.

“Your boyfriend didn’t bring flowers today,” he says.

I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing to him, and how exactly is it his business.

“He’s not around today,” I say.

I need the energy, so I keep forcing the drink, I need to drink at least half of it.

“You look distracted, you’re not your arrogant self,” he says.

I almost choke laughing. Me, arrogant?

“Do you have a mirror in your house Dr Manzini?” I ask.

He chuckles and says nothing. He looks so much like Zothani, it's weird.

“How is my sister?” I ask.

He sighs, “She's okay.”

I don't trust that answer.

Maybe I can get an advice from him since he's sitting here with me and he knows a lot of things about humans.

“Can I ask you something that doesn't concern you?”

He pulls his eyebrows, “Yeah.”

His face isn't welcoming but I ask anyway.

“How to help someone who's having self-harm thoughts?”

“Self-harm is driven by the need to gain relief from a depressing state of mind. So

you help them get relieved from that state, then they won't have self-harm thoughts," he says.

Very straightforward. I don't know if I did that to him last night, but I was able to make him laugh, when we woke up in the morning he was in a happier mood.

"Then help her get psychotherapy," he says.

"It's a 'he', my boyfriend, and I believe he has a therapist," I say.

"Oh," he says.

I don't know what that means.

He clears his throat, "Does he have support?"

“Yes, but I don’t know if it’s enough. He was okay until recently after have a physical altercation with the father of my child. Then we found out they’re half-brothers, now his father is trying to fix that situation with the other son’s family and I don’t think he’s taking it well. A lot happened in his childhood, he’s not on talking terms with his mother’s side of the family and now his father is his ‘enemy’s’ father. I’m scared he’s going to start drinking again and trying to kill himself.”

He’s frowning. “The boy who dropped you here in the morning?”

He’s not a boy, but I nod.

“I thought he was a natural meek,” he says.

“He’s not a meek, he’s just quiet and shy,” I say.

“Sorry,” he chuckles. “But honestly I had a brother, I would’ve loved for someone to pick him up if I wasn’t around, I’ve had my fair share of mental difficulties too. Tell him to link up for drinks when he’s around.”

“Seriously Dr Manzini?” I ask.

“Why do you call me that when we are not in a working environment? Do I call you Lab Technician Mhlongo?” He’s standing his dramatic ass up.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“I’m glad you are,” he walks off.

And then he wants to call me arrogant?

**I hope Nkalipho will accept his drinks offer
and not think I talked about him to
strangers with the aim of embarrassing
him.**

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 65

SALO MHLONGO

I don't want to do this and Nkatha knows that. Busisekile is not mental unstable, she's reaping what she sow. It's probably the ancestors punishing her for what she did to her own family. But he's a doctor and they say doctors know best. I'm only taking this journey because he begged me to. I don't care about my mother, I wouldn't care even if she was really crazy and collecting papers on the streets.

I'm home after a long time. It doesn't even feel like a home anymore, it's like I'm just in a random place. I haven't seen my father in a while. He's happy when I climb out of the car. He's aware of why we are here, he's surprisingly supportive of the idea of my mother being sent to a mental institution.

He comes and gives me a hug. I'm cold, I can't even fake it. I was betrayed by this man.

"My grandson is growing," he remarks.

I force a smile. He invites us to come inside the house. A lot has been changed, my pictures have been removed from the dining room. I have no doubt Busisekile did that. I can't see her here by the way.

"Where is your wife?" I ask my dad.

"She's gone to MaNkosi, she's coming back."

She's delaying us, I want to take her to the mental institution and have her admitted and get over this. My father is super excited about this, he's taken out her bags, a lot of them.

**“She’s not going to be away forever baba,”
Nkatha says.**

**I’m tempted to laugh. That’s a lot of bags
for someone who’s probably going to wear
a gown most of the time. It looks like he’s
now taking this as getting rid of his beloved
wife.**

**“I’m so happy someone noticed that she’s
no longer sane. Thank you son for this,” he
says.**

**I don’t know how many times he’s thanked
Nkatha.**

**“Should I get you anything to drink since
your sister-in-law is now a guest at her own
home?” he asks Nkatha.**

**I’m not a guest, I don’t know where things
are, his wife changed everything.**

Nkatha chuckles, “No baba, thanks.”

He seriously thinks there’s someone who’d be comfortable eating and drinking their stuff.

Busisekile arrives after some time, she looks surprised to see her bags on the floor.

“Are these my expensive bags Njomane?” she asks.

They’re not expensive, it’s part of her madness.

“We are taking you to that place I was telling you about,” my dad says.

“Which place?” She frowns.

“That one where they counsel women who’ve been through a lot in life and their marriages,” he says.

“Ok,” she comes in the dining room and sees us.

She smiles, “Look who’s home? My daughter and her new boyfriend.”

Gosh, this boyfriend thing is getting out of hand.

I don’t correct her though, she comes and hugs both of us. I’m so uncomfortable.

“I’m glad you came with him, he will drive,” she says, taking out the van keys from her bra and throwing them at him.

“We will use his car, not the van,” I say.

“No, I don’t like people’s cars, we are using the van. Come and help me choose an outfit,” she says, tapping her hand on my shoulder.

I didn't come here for this, but I go with her.

She's probably spent all the money I gave her making changes everywhere. I don't recognize the bedroom anymore. She's surely unemployed and extravagant, what a combination!

"So are you really crazy or this is just a stunt?" I ask, standing by the newly bought queen's bed.

"Crazy? Who said I'm crazy? Your father?" She's not even looking at me. She doesn't care about anything. She's going through the wardrobe, it's almost empty because my dad packed most of her things.

"So you're not going to the psychiatry to hide from your scandals?" I ask.

“What scandals? What psychiatry?” she asks.

“Ma, you don’t have to pretend with me. What’s up with you?”

“What’s up with who?” So she’s going to ask me questions after every question that I ask her.

What exactly am I doing in this room?

“Please change the bed for me,” she says throwing a clean sheet to me.

“You said I’m here to help you pick an outfit,” I say.

“What outfit?” Mxm.

I don’t see anything wrong with the bed, but I change the sheet as she requested.

I'm also noticing strange things about her. She moves around quickly and doesn't maintain eye contact. Could she be really losing her mind? I don't know how I feel about that, I want her to be sane and suffer the consequences of her actions.

We walk out, she's changed to a dress and tied a scarf around her head.

"Salabenzi is saying you're taking me to mad people," she says to Nkatha.

He raises his eyes to me, "You said that?"

Fuck!

"She did, so why are you taking me to mad people? Who are you?" She's angry, I didn't see it coming.

"It's not a mad people institution, but rather a place where people who've been

through hard times like you go and get counseled. You've mourned thinking your husband was dead, your daughter moved out and got pregnant out of wedlock..." I raise my eyebrows, why is he dragging my name to her madness?

"They're going to counsel you so that you heal from all the bad things that have happened to you," he says.

She hesitantly nods. My dad stands next to her and holds her hand. He's smiling to himself, there's joy all over his face.

"Salabenzi take the bags to my car," she says.

"But we can't fit in a van, we have to use Bhut' Nkatha's car."

"No, I don't like people's cars," she says.

Deep breath! There's no way I'm going to ride at the back of the van, I'm not a goat.

“But he's not a stranger, he's my boyfriend,” I say.

Nkatha looks at me. After he dragged my name to reason with her, I can surely do the same.

“Okay then,” she finally agrees.

We had a lot of stops, luckily it was Nkatha who was doing everything, getting into places and explaining. She's under the impression that she's here to get counseling because life has been hard on her. It's a

women institution, some look okay, some look really mad. I think she will be the 'mad but normal' squad. I don't feel a pinch of sadness, at least people will be safe while she's here. Given that her husband doesn't continue where they left off.

The bags are not going in. They only took the smaller one with her essentials. Nkatha brings them to the car, I stayed behind. He's really determined to "get her help".

"Are you not hungry?" he asks me.

"I am, but what can I do? There's no shop around here and I have to wait until you guys admit her," I say.

"You look annoyed," he says, fixing his stare at me.

“Because this is a ring fire, she started it and now it has come back to her. It’s her time to suffer, we’ve been in the ring of her fire, now it’s her time to burn. This isn’t a mental illness, but karma.”

“She’s still your mother though, we can’t fold arms and not help her. It might get worse and uncontrollable,” he says.

“Fine, get her help,” I shrug.

He sighs and leaves again.

I need a nap or a snack, any between those two.

I see my father making his way to the car, he’s changed even the way he walks, he now walks like someone who just won

Lottery. I don't know what he has in his hands.

Oh, it's a packet of Simba chips.

I hate him, not the snacks.

"I hear you are hungry, take this, I got it from the canteen inside," he says.

"Thank you," I tear the pocket open right away.

He stands with a ghost of a smile on his face.

"Things are going to be okay from now onwards," he says.

I don't respond, he's got no spine, he betrayed me.

"I know you're angry and I understand why. But I wasn't innocent, I couldn't act

that way, I had to stay with her to make sure MaNkosi got what she wanted,” he says.

“I don’t care anymore baba,” I tell him.

“I do care, I want you to be able to visit home and feel like you’re home.”

I doubt that can still happen, I’m alright at the Zungus, I will go back to my apartment after I’ve given birth, there’s nothing calling me home.

“What are you planning to do now that she’s here?” ask.

“I will get Thembelihle back,” he says.

I knew he had something up in his sleeve.

“She’s not going to be here forever, they might discharge her even next week if she gets better,” I say.

“Then she will find me with another woman,” he says, like it’s going to be easy like ABC.

He’s also losing his mind, I don’t see how that is going to work, he doesn’t even know where Aunt Teekay is, yet he’s making plans for them.

We left her, she was still convinced that she was just there to get counseling. Now we are heading back home to drop my father off. He’s the happiest man alive. He even

offered to buy me KFC when we had a stop at the mall. I must say it's still strange to be at the mall and not expect to see Nondu at Shoprite. It's becoming a habit for me to eat inside Nkatha's car, I don't think he likes it but he understands because I'm pregnant.

As we drive through the gate I notice that the door is open. We left no one here, we hid the key in the secret place only the family knows. I hope nobody broke in and stole Busisekile's 'expensive' things.

"Who is here?" I ask.

"I don't know, maybe your brother or sister," my dad says.

"It's school day, why would any of them be here?" I'm anxiously waiting for Nkatha to

stop the car so that I can go and see what's going on.

He finally turns and parks the car. We climb out and take the bag in with us.

It's indeed one of the siblings. Sbonga.

"Hey you," I'm surprised to see her here, yesterday we talked and she didn't mention anything about coming home. She's wearing a bomber jacket in this heat.

"Sbonga, I didn't you were coming home," – my dad.

She's standing with her arms crossed around her neck. She's not herself, because Sbonga would've asked something about the bags by now.

"Why are you here? What about school?" I ask.

We are all now standing and looking at her.

“I’m not well,” she says.

Her school should’ve called me and told me.

“Since when?” I ask.

I look at the plate, she plastered two slices of bread with half a bottle of peanut butter, if not all of it.

She moves her arm to her face, wiping invisible sweat. I notice something strange as he jacket lifts up, my heart starts beating fast.

“Please take the bags to the dining room, I will put them back in her wardrobe,” I say, dismissing the two men. I need a moment alone with her, already I feel like my knees are shaking and I can’t stand anymore.

They go, leaving me with her.

“Can you take your jacket off?”

“Hhayi, I’m cold.”

She thinks this is a game.

“Sbonga are you pregnant?”

She bites her fingernails and looks at me with sorrow.

“Take the jacket off,” I say, more firm and aggressive.

She slowly takes it off. I haven’t seen her for some time, her tummy is visibly pregnant.

“How can you do this to me Sbonga?” I’m weak, I feel like crying my lungs off. I did everything for her, I made sure she lives the life I never got to live. She’s seen the way

this family is. Who is going to take care of the baby while she finishes school?

“I’m sorry, it was a mistake,” she’s crying too, crocodile tears.

“A mistake Sbonga?” I talked to this child about sex and everything. She knows what to do if she wants to have sex, I told her everything.

“You don’t have a mother, she’s alive but you don’t have her. What do you expect me to do? I can’t raise two babies, who do you think is going to raise this baby. Where is the father?”

She looks away. I’m not violent but I wish I can slap her.

“Do you know him? Does he know that you’re pregnant?”

She shakes her head. I pull the chair with my last strength and sit.

Why is everyone around me so unfair? Why can't anyone consider my feelings for once? Sbonga knows the dilemma I'm facing, she knows the sacrifices I've made to afford her the life she has. Why throw all that back to my face?

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 66

SALO MHLONGO

“Do you want ice-cream?”

I wish he can keep quiet, the last thing I’m thinking about is ice-cream.

“No,” I say.

He glances at me, “Any snacks you want?”

“I want to sleep bhut’ Nkatha,” I say, almost snapping at him.

“I understand how you feel,” he says.

I don’t think he understands anything, his daughter is almost out of teenagehood and she’s never been pregnant. She finished high school with no big stomach and she would’ve known who the father was had it happened. Unlike Sbonga who still needs to

confirm between the guy she had unprotected sex with three months ago and her boyfriend. At this age I've never slept with two different guys in one month, what she did was stupid.

“Nokwanda moved in with me at 4 years old, her mother had to go and study abroad for a couple of years. I was working at the hospital, just started, and I had to single-handedly raise a girl child. I didn't see it then, but it was the best thing that could've happened. I'm a man, I know how boys are because I was once a boy. I taught her everything, at 10 years she already knew about sex, and by that I don't mean just the basics, everything. When she had sex for the first time she obviously didn't tell me until two months later. I know it sounds

like I motivated her to do it more, but I took her to a gynecologist and had them discussing birth control, she was 16, that was 3 years ago.”

I’m looking at him and I’m judging him. Hell yes, it sounds like motivation.

“Had I not done that, she would’ve been pregnant by now because she likes older guys.”

“Older guys?” I raise my eyebrow thinking back to Zothani’s player who was kept a secret.

“Athletic, older guys. I think she’s currently dating a 25 year old,” he says with a shrug, like it doesn’t matter, he approves of whatever she does. He’s definitely talking

about the football player that Nokwanda is so sure he doesn't know about.

“Don't you worry about diseases?” I ask.

“I'm a doctor, I regularly check my child's health status,” he says.

“So you don't care about her dating, even older guys?”

He chuckles, “I will care if they hurt her, but my baby knows what she's worth, I'm not going to motivate her to stick to a guy who doesn't make her happy. As long as she's not dating above 27, she's still within her range.”

“Yooh!” Clap once, clap twice.

“Your sister will learn her lesson, raising a child is not child's play.”

“How is she going to raise a child before obtaining her matric?”

“So what are you going to do? Make her terminate it?”

What? I’d never do that.

“I have to make a plan,” I say.

He’s quiet for a moment, we are driving through traffic lights. Then he asks, “What plan? You also have a baby to raise, you can’t divide yourself.”

He doesn’t understand, I’m hurt by what Sbonga did but I still want the best for her.

I want her to have a bright future, so I’m compelled to come up with a plan.

“The first thing would be to move back home,” I say.

“Move back home? EMandeni?” He makes it sound like that’s a township in another side of hell.

“Yes, I’ve ran away and problems still followed me. I can be miles away but nothing changes that I’m a Mhlongo and those are my siblings, I may not like my parents very much but I’d die for Sbonga and Sekhona,” I say.

“How is that going to help her?”

“My mother is not there, my father has his own madness thinking he’s getting a second chance to a fairytale life, she doesn’t have anyone to look after her,” I say.

“Is she dropping out?” he asks.

“Yes, all the money I paid for her fees down the drain.”

“I’m really sorry,” he says.

I nod and lean back on the seat, I’m mentally exhausted. It feels like I haven’t breathe since the day Zothani left me. His presence would’ve made even heaviest moments feel easy. I miss him, days are turning into weeks, soon I will welcome our son alone, without one person who wanted to meet him the most.

I turn my head to the window, I don’t want Nkatha to see me crying.

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NONDUMEZULU

Nkalipho fetched me from Stanger, it's finally Friday, tomorrow we are going to see his mother's cousin. He's communicated with her and she's expecting us. We will spend the night in his house, unfortunately today I cannot bring Nzuzo with me because early in the morning we will be traveling.

I feel bad being around Mandeni and not seeing him. I'm literally on wife duties; cleaning the house, cooking and taking out his laundry. I don't know why I do this, I just feel like he deserves it for everything he's done for me. It's just a few pants, I soak them and finish with the pots first.

He walks in, glued to his phone

“There’s a meeting tomorrow morning,” he says, reading something on his phone.

“What meeting? Are we not leaving in the morning?” I ask.

“I’m telling him that I can’t be there, especially if his son is going to be there,” he says.

I think Mnguni is trying to make a reconciliation between the two. I don’t see forgiveness happening, Solwazi is too cocky and Nkalipho is not comfortable with him. This is just a waste of time.

He pushes the phone into the picket and comes next to me. He snatches a piece of meat from the bowl at the side.

“You’re a good cook,” he says, he’s still blowing on the meat, he hasn’t tasted it.

This reminds me why I shouldn’t get flattered by all his compliments.

He’s in a happier mood today.

“Did I tell you that Dr Manzini invited you to have drinks with him whenever you are around Shakaskraal?” I ask.

He frowns, “No, you didn’t tell me. Why does he want to have drinks with me?”

“He just wants to have drinks with you. Is there a problem?” I ask.

He stares at me for a minute. “He’s not my friend, that’s why I’m confused.”

“You don’t have friends,” I say.

“Do you have them except the hairdresser you met a few weeks ago and your ex-colleagues?”

“Those are my friends, I don’t need besties,” I say.

“I have people I hang out with, and my workers whom I’m close to.”

Okay, this wasn’t a friends competition, I’m simply asking him to go to drinks with my boss.

“What must I tell him?” I ask.

He shrugs, “Fine, I will go but I won’t drink.”

I accidentally slip into laughter. He won’t do what? Nkalipho mustn’t fool me.

He spanks my ass, “Why are you laughing?”

“It shows you’re good, go and try comedy.”

“Thank you for believing in me,” he says.

I roll my eyes and continue laughing. This food I’m cooking is not up to the standard that I want, but at the end of the day I’m not a chef, he will have to eat and compliment me.

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I stayed behind and got ready for our trip while he went to the meeting his father summoned him to. I saw Solwazi’s car driving past, I’m wondering what they’re

talking about there. I bought a new dress, I'm doing all this glam for his maternal aunt whom I'm not even sure will welcome us warmly. But I feel like he's now taking necessary steps towards healing and making peace with his past and relatives. Whether they forgive him or not, his heart will be pure and I will be nursing it.

My phone rings as I put my earrings on.

It's him, I answer.

"Babe can you bring my jacket? I'm cold," he asks.

"Okay, but I told you to dress up and cover your arms, mornings are cold and..."

"Yes mam, I'm sorry I didn't listen," he says before I finish ranting.

Such an ass! I drop the call and finish my glam first before taking his jacket to him.

Solwazi looks angered when he sees me walking in. It's him and his uncle, and the Mngunis. It's an intimate 'family only' meeting. Nkalipho stands up and comes to me and takes the jacket.

"How is the boy?" Solwazi's uncle asks.

*He's fine," I don't know how cold I must be for him to understand that I don't like him asking me questions about my son. He can easily drive to my mother's house and check on his grandchild. Bloody oil of Satan's truck!

"You don't have to hurry out MaNjomane," Mnguni says, smiling warmly at me.

I'm rushing to leave because I don't want to intrude and I don't really like the Dlomos and if I open my mouth I will drive them to depression, they don't know me very well.

"You can sit babygirl," Masentle adds.

"Thank you, but I was still getting my stuff ready for the trip," I say, trying my utmost best to dismiss myself.

"This concerns your family, you might want to hear the resolution," she says.

Okay, I will sit and listen.

I sit next to Nkalipho, I don't know what the mood is between him and the Dlomos.

"Clearly Nkalipho loves you, right now they just need to come to a mutual understanding. Not only are they related, but they both love the little Nzuzo as well.

**That's what we are trying to resolve,"
Mnguni explains.**

"No, Solwazi doesn't love Nzuzo," I say.

**He shifts and sits with his upper body
leaning forward. I may have been attracted
to him back then, but not anymore. In fact,
I don't like him, especially after he made
Nkalipho feel the way he does.**

**"Solwazi doesn't have a problem with
Nkalipho. There's nothing to resolve. It's
me he doesn't like, Nkalipho got caught up
in the middle. Solwazi doesn't like him
because he's associated with me and he
makes me happy. Even if it wasn't him but
another strange guy, he would've still not
liked him because he hates seeing me loved
and happy," I say.**

Mnguni definitely didn't expect me to say this much, I'm always reserved around him, he doesn't know my real character. I'm not calm and collected, maybe I was, before Solwazi messed me up.

"We can solve our issues some other time, I know I hurt you a lot and I can apologize for that for the rest of my life," he says.

"No, this isn't about me, it's about you. This is truth and reconciliation, right? Then tell Nkalipho why you don't like him? Why you text me and insult him with his eye condition that he has no control over."

Neither Mnguni nor Nkalipho knew about this. Mnguni's jaw tightens, you can come for Nkalipho about everything, but not that.

“It’s not that you don’t like him. You don’t know him like that, you’re a busy person Solwazi, you don’t care about a random guy co-owning a construction company with his father and living his life the way he knows how. Until that guy makes one person you hate the most happy. Then it becomes your worst nightmare, it keeps you awake at night. You are willing to do anything in your power to break us up. It irks you that he loves me and your son has a father figure.”

“Nondu this isn’t about us, I know how you feel about me.” He’s lying, he doesn’t know anything about my feelings and I’m not going to keep quiet.

“You didn’t have a proper upbringing. You were not taught the importance of a father role in one’s life because your mother and her sister taught you that money is more important than anything in life and having a father is not. They killed all the men in their lives and lied about their children’s paternity.” I feel Nkalipho’s hand on my shoulder. I don’t know why he’s trying to hold me while I’m still talking. He calls my name in a soft whisper, I ignore him.

“You didn’t want your son to have a father because you never had one. You are a moron, you don’t have good morals, you’re useless, you’re a waste of time.” I don’t care about the murmurs, I will tell him what I want and say it how I want to say it.

“But guess what, Nzuzo loves you, he thinks you’re not a mean-spirited person. He calls you baba and talks about you everyday. That’s not because he’s stupid. No, that’s because his mother didn’t lie about his paternity and his grandmother, my mother, is a good woman of morals. You weren’t around but he’s still a man, unlike you stupid boy.”

“Baby please,” Nkalipho. I don’t know why he’s bothered, this is the same man who looked at him like he was stupid for asking for his forgiveness over a few punches.

“Please don’t insult my sister, maka boy. She’s not alive to defend herself, let her rest in peace, don’t involve her in this,” Solwazi’s uncle says. When everything

happened he didn't care, he didn't open his mouth and defended his late sister's grandson, but now he can speak.

“I'm not talking about her, I'm talking about him. He's stupid, if he doesn't like Nkalipho he can go back to his hole, it's not like he has something to teach Nzuzo about life. All he knows is living off stolen inheritance. Maybe he thought he'd inherit my brains by dating me, but you still failed even in private schools, dumbass.”

Nkalipho pulls me off the chair, I'm not done yet. His crocodile tears don't move me, I haven't told him about his team that loses every match because he's a born loser.

“Your mother swapped you for a check!” I yell before Nkalipho pulls me out of the door.

The bloody oil of Satan’s truck! I had more to say to him. He hasn’t started crying, I want him to cry like Nzuzo when he doesn’t get things his own way.

“Let’s go,” Nkalipho says, he’s still holding my hand, we are headed towards the gate.

“Why do you care? He’s an idiot, I don’t care about his feelings the same way he doesn’t care about mine. I’ve been very nice to him and his wife, not even once have I ever disrespected them. And he can’t afford me the same respect, he can go and dig himself a grave next to his mother and...”

“Babe, babe, stop! You’re a good person, don’t let him turn you into something you are not,” he says.

“No, I’m not a good person, I can insult him until tomorrow,” I say.

“Okay, we are leaving though, I don’t want to sit there and watch you swearing and him crying. Did you see that you’ve messed your hairstyle over him?” He stops and fixes my hairdo.

First, Solwazi messed up my life and son’s life, now my hairstyle!

**He stops me before I open my mouth,
“Don’t start again, he’s not here, I don’t want to listen to it.”**

I breathe...in and out.

Then we go.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 67

NONDUMEZULU

We have arrived in Greytown, eMdlovane. I can tell that he's scared, we don't know if we will get a warm welcome or he's here to dig old wounds and get burnt for it. The aunt is married, this is her husband's house, he's late though. We park outside the gate and walk in by foot. There's a dog

in the yard but thank God it doesn't bark at us. A little boy comes to us and shows us where to enter.

It's not just the aunt, there are two other ladies who look like her next to her. I think they're her daughters, just that they look a bit grown, phuza faces and skin bleaching side effects.

We greet, they greet us back, but there's something missing. Warmth. I was scared this was going to happen.

"You can sit," the aunt shows us the couch.

We sit, they're staring at us, mainly at him.

"I'm Nkalipho, this is my girlfriend Nondumezulu Mhlongo," he says.

The focus shifts to me. Hell, this is super awkward.

“You’ve grown,” the aunt says after a moment. “You’re no longer a chubby face.”

Oh, he used to be a chubby face?

“I’m 29,” he says, dropping his eyes.

Nkalipho is naturally shy, it’s not even about his eyes, he only warms up to people after a certain time.

“Yeah, I know,” the aunt says.

Then she turns to one of her daughters,

“Make them tea and vetkoeks.”

“Where is your father?” she asks, looking at Nkalipho again.

“He’s home,” he says.

“Why don’t you visit?”

Nkalipho clears his throat, “I wasn’t sure where everyone stays.”

He's just covering up, he doesn't visit because they hate him.

"Do you have kids?" she asks.

"A stepson," he says.

I didn't expect him to say that. I know what the aunt is thinking as she turns to look at me. I have a child and her nephew doesn't, she doesn't say anything though.

"I was surprised to get your call because I never thought we'd see each other again in this lifetime. I thought maybe in the after life we'd be able to resolve our issues as a family. We are scattered all over KZN, Mapeh is in Clermont," she says.

"The last time I saw her she wasn't very happy about me. It was about 10 years ago, that's part of the reasons I've been keeping

my distance, I don't want to hurt anybody. I'm truly sorry about what happened, I know you were all hurt," he says.

I put my hand over his, I know it takes a lot for him to take the blame for something that was done to him. His mother wasn't innocent, there were so many times that she could've killed him, in fact she attempted to a number of times.

"What hurts me Nkalipho is that you grew up thinking your mother didn't love you. You meant everything to Gcinile, it was unfortunate that things ended the way they did. What angered me the most is that I talked to them, I wanted you to go and live with Mapeh and your father was the first to refuse. Things were not great between

them from the very first beginning, there was no love.”

I feel like files are about to come out. I’m glad I’m here to hear first-hand, I mean first-ear.

“She loved him,” Nkalipho argues.

“You were young, I’m sure you didn’t know a lot of things. Your mother was 6 years older than your father, there was abuse involved, from both sides. I think that was one of the reasons he ran to Durban. Your mother was a short-tempered person but she had a great heart.”

I’m having a different picture from what she’s trying to paint. A great heart wouldn’t have allowed her to cut her son’s stomach with a knife, that I’m sure of.

“Did she hit him as well?” he asks.

She chuckles first, you can tell she still loves and doesn’t fault her cousin for anything she did.

“She once stabbed him, you were about a month old or so, she used a kitchen knife. Your father knew she was short-tempered but he still did things to provoke her,” she says.

I want to chirp in with my two cents, but this isn’t my place.

“He’s never told me that, I know that he got mugged and stabbed by a guy on the street,” Nkalipho says, looking disturbed by this revelation.

“It was your mother, he’s embarrassed, he couldn’t handle her, he was a boy. All the

Hlophe women don't take nonsense, your father shouldn't have had a baby if he wasn't ready for a family with her. I saw that he was struggling, Gcinile too, she wanted a perfect family. That's why I suggested that Mapeh takes you then they work out their issues. He said no because he thought we were siding with Gcinile and trying to take you away from him. I blame him for everything, I know he used the accident that happened to keep you away from us, that's what he always wanted anyway," she says.

Nkalipho releases a deep breath, then he turns his head to me and asks if I can get him water. I stand and look around, I don't know if I should get it from the car or ask the ladies in the kitchen.

The aunt yells for Mbali to bring it and tells me to sit down and relax.

“Is he still married to that young girl?” she asks Nkalipho.

“Yes, they’re still married.” He no longer sounds interested as he was.

It makes sense why his father went for someone younger than him. Not just any young, but really young, she could be his daughter. I mean, she’s even younger than Solwazi. He had a bad experience with older women, from Solwazi’s mother to Nkalipho’s.

“I hope he’s grown a pair of balls now,” she says and takes out a bottle of pills. I expect her to ask for water and drinks medication,

but she's pouring dry snuff to her palm and sniffing.

"I thank God that you're here and you are well," she says.

Mbali walks in with a tray of tea. I'm not hungry but I have to take at least one vetkoek so that it doesn't look like I'm disrespectful.

Mbali and her sister rejoin us. Her sister introduces herself as Nosi, they're just happy that we are here and their cousin whom they last saw as a child now has a beautiful car.

"You will give me a lift and drop me somewhere on the way," that's an older one, Nosi, saying.

Her mother gives her a dirty look. “You’re not leaving me with your children again!”

“I want to collect money from their father before he drinks all of it,” she says, pleading to her with her eyes.

“It’s always that same excuse, when you get there you always drink the money with him and come back here a week later empty-handed. If you leave take your two kids with you, wait for them they’re about to come back from church,” the aunt. At least there are people who go to church here, there’s hope.

“Do you know how many times Gcinile tried to stop breastfeeding you and failed? The moment you started crying she’d always feel bad and wash the chilli off her

breasts,” the aunt tells Nkalipho laughing.

“I had to intervene when she failed for the third time, I took you to come and sleep with me for three nights, she had no chance to try and breast you. She was a hard-headed woman, but when it comes to you she was soft as a marshmallow.”

She’s still laughing, Nkalipho’s mood has changed to something colder than the Pacific oceans. I have to fake it and laugh along with her because now it looks weird.

“She would come to my door, I’d refuse with you and feed you amahewu,” she says.

Awkward! I think Nkalipho just wants to leave now.

“Now that you’re rich and have a car, we must go home and perform a ceremony for

her. I know your father will convince you not to, but you were her only child and it's your responsibility to make sure that her sleep is peaceful, otherwise she will haunt you." This sounds like blackmail. I don't think Nkalipho got the closure he was looking for, if anything he's more pissed at his mother.

"I will plan," he says.

Mbali chirps in, "You can call me and send the money, I will do all the preparations. I loved Aunt Gci."

"Thank you mzala, I will keep that in mind," he says.

We eat one vetkoek each and drink the tea, then his aunt takes us on a yard tour and shows us low-quality pictures of her

marriage. Her husband died almost 14 years ago, she's still in love with him and thinks her life would've turned out better if she had Gcinile's support when he passed. Finally, they walk us outside the gate and begs us to visit some other day and sleep the night.

Things are tense in the car, I don't know what is going through his mind or what he's feeling right now. I let him be with his thoughts, I know when he's ready he will open up. I check my phone and I have missed a couple of calls from the number Aunt Teekay usually calls me with. O buy airtime through my banking app and call her.

“Hey baby, do I have to make an appointment before I call you?”

I laugh, “No aunty, I’m sorry I was busy.”

“Okay, I’m coming to your mother’s house tomorrow. Are you going to be able to come and see me? There’s an urgent announcement I want to make and I want you to meet someone.”

“The new uncle?” I ask.

“New? Did you have an old one?”

Nakho-ke!

“Yes, Babo,” I say.

I hear her clicking her tongue. “Tell that boyfriend of yours to drive you home. If he’s husband material he will gladly do so.

Then you stop talking about things you don't know of."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I hope I will like the new uncle, I mean the only uncle." I love this for her, I'm so happy because she almost reached her 40s without finding and believing in love.

So I'm not going back to Shakaskraal today, I have to go home for Aunt Teekay's homecoming. I need to buy a few things and make it a celebration lunch for the family. Gifts too. Can I afford them?

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NKALIPHO

He's caught between anger and sympathy. Mnguni lied about a lot of things. When he left him with his mother he knew what she was capable of, yet he still lived comfortably with Solwazi's mother not knowing what was happening back home. Then there's a part that feels sorry for him because of the abuse he got too, and the gaslighting he continues to get from his maternal relatives. It makes sense why he'd rather keep it a secret and lies about being mugged and stabbed by thugs.

He needs to have a conversation with Mnguni before he goes to sleep. After helping Nondu with shopping he drives her home and spends some time with Nzuzo in

the car. Then he heads to his own home with mixed feelings and emotions. It's late in the afternoon, they last spoke after the meeting with Solwazi that ended in tears. He did feel sorry for Solwazi when he was crying, Nondu was brutal, especially when she told him he was swapped because that wasn't his fault. But he had to support his girlfriend, after all Solwazi has openly proved to him time to time that there's no love lost between them.

“You're back!” Masentle.

She's cooking in the kitchen, wearing a long floral dress and a doek, which rarely happens.

“Are you in the mood for a deep question?”

She's in a good mood.

Nkalipho holds onto the counter and nods. He's not in the mood though.

“How would you feel about having a little brother or sister?” she asks.

At 29 these are the type of questions he gets. If he wasn't this heartbroken he would've laughed out loud.

“I'm cool with it, Sphiwe is my little brother,” he says.

“I'm talking about another one, if your dad and I had a baby,” she says.

“I guess you can, but you're not going to get a girl, he produces males only.” It's Solwazi, him and Sphiwe. What are the chances of a girl?

“Who wants another baby? You or him,” he asks.

“Both of us, we’ve been trying...” He rubs his face and groans.

Masentle laughs, “Listen, we’ve been trying, just that we didn’t put much effort, it was going to happen if it happened. But now I want us to try more often and enhance.”

“I’m glad I moved out,” he says.

They both laugh.

Then he asks where Mnguni is, Masentle directs him to the garage storage where he’s working.

They’re about to have a difficult conversation. They might fight again, it’s becoming a recurring things lately and he doesn’t like it one bit.

He's fixing Sphiwe's old bike.

"Ntwana!" Sphiwe yells.

He smiles, "Sho ntwana."

"Daddy is fixing my bike," he's excited.

"That's awesome, you are going to go to school on your bike now." He's rubbing his head.

"Really?" Sphiwe looks up, surprised and excited.

"Yes, your mother will get permission from the police so that they don't arrest you when they see you on the road riding without a license," he says.

"Let me go and ask mommy now," he pulls off the embrace and runs off.

He's so gullible, Nkalipho is laughing.

Mnguni looks up, “You’re back already? I thought you’d spend the whole day with your aunt.”

“No, I didn’t,” he says.

A brief moment of silence passes.

Then he clears his throat, “Did you love my mother? Did she love you?”

Mnguni sighs, “I knew you were going to come back with questions. Your aunt will do anything to discredit me. Yes, your mother and I loved each other.”

“Then why did you leave?” he asks.

Mnguni’s brows furrow. “I had to work, you know that.”

“Why didn’t you take us with you?” –
Nkalipho.

“I left to look for a job, I didn’t have it, so I couldn’t bring a woman and my child to the hostel.”

“Were the thugs who stabbed you ever arrested?”

Mnguni is getting frustrated with these questions. “I never reported them, I didn’t know them. Can I finish fixing this bike before Sphiwe starts crying?”

“Baba,” – Nkalipho.

He sighs and looks up again.

“She stabbed you and abused you. Why did you leave me with her?”

“Your mother never raised her hand...”

Nkalipho sighs and cuts him short.

“I know she did, it doesn’t make you less of anything, you don’t have to be embarrassed about it. I can recall a few instances but I wasn’t old enough to understand what was it. I just want to know why you left me behind knowing what she was capable of and why you refused for Aunt Mapeh to take me,” he says.

“There were rumors Nkalipho, I can’t tell you everything that’s not even important. I was wrong to leave you behind, I’m sorry,” Mnguni says.

“What rumors?” – Nkalipho.

“Your aunts didn’t like me, they kept saying you were not mine. I didn’t want to

believe them and I didn't, I wasn't allowed to take you with me," he says.

Nkalipho's heartbeat starts racing, his mind recalls a lot other things now.

"You're my son, I confirmed it," Mnguni says before he breaks down.

"Your aunts just didn't like me. They still don't, I don't want you to go there, none of them wanted you when you were the so-called demonic child. I've raised you up on my own, I may have failed you here and there, but that doesn't make me unworthy of being your father. You're a Mnguni, this is where you will raise your children and be buried at. Anyone who claims to care about you only cares about the advantages that may come from being related to you."

“She wants me to perform a ceremony for my mother,” Nkalipho says.

“You can, if you want to,” – Mnguni.

He nods, exhaling heavily. Then he turns to leave, he needs to take a bath and then have time to himself with his own thoughts.

“Nkalipho,” Mnguni calls behind.

Nkalipho turns and looks at him.

“Don’t tell anyone about that, I’m not comfortable with it,” he says.

Nkalipho nods, even though he wishes he could make peace with it and not take it as a shame. But he has to respect his decision.

“You’re trying for a baby?” he asks, just to leave things on a lighter note.

Mnguni chuckles, “Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, but I think I’m too old to have a baby as a brother or sister. It’s my time to make babies, not yours,” he says.

“How am I stopping you? I’m trying to make a baby with my wife, not your girlfriend,” – Mnguni.

Nkalipho shakes his head and leaves.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 68

“Dad, you can’t just throw away my mother’s belongings,” Sbonga says with a sigh. She’s standing at the door with a bowl of stir-fry watching as her father loads all her mother’s belongings at the back of the van. It’s been only a day since she was admitted and he’s already sending her things to the Khumalos, as if they’ve divorced.

He doesn’t respond, he walks in to fetch more stuff. He’s trying to get everything that has Busisekile’s name out of the house as soon as possible. Fate made everything possible; Thembelihle is coming home today, this is the chance they’ve been looking for ever since they started having

an affair. Busisekile is finally out of his life, when she comes back from the looner-house he will give her the divorce papers. They were able to reconcile with MaNkosi, she got what they took from her, even though they couldn't undo the damages they had already caused. Now there's nothing left for them, he's starting a new chapter with his kids and Thembelihle.

Sbonga follows him to the bedroom, he's stripping off the bed and putting in new bed sheets.

“Do you have a side-chick coming here?”

Sbonga asks.

He looks up, “Hey, you're still a child, this is my house, I don't answer to you.”

“It’s my mother’s house as well,” Sbonga raises her eyebrows.

She’s always been just like her mother; her mouth is always open. He loves her very much, both her and Sekhona, he raised them. But if Sbonga continues with this attitude she might as well go and look for her biological father.

She’s still standing at the door, challenging him with a glare.

“Your mother and I have been separated for a very long time now. What I do is none of your business, go and watch cartoons,” he says.

“I’m not 6, I’m telling you nobody is going to move into my mother’s bedroom,” Sbonga stands by her word. She’s here, no

woman is going to come and take her mother's place while she's unwell.

“Sbonga, I'm warning you!” – Babo.

“No dad, I'm not going to let you cheat on my mother again. She's out there trying to be mentally well for you and this is what you want to do? I dare whoever she is to come here,” she turns and takes one step out.

“I've cheated but I've never brought in a bastard child.”

Sbonga turns wearing a huge frown,

“Excuse me?”

“You're excused Sbonga, I'm busy,” he's packing the old pillow cases.

“Who's a bastard child?” Sbonga demands an answer. She's both shocked and angry.

“Do I have to spell it out? She’s been keeping you and your brother away from me because she knows how she got you,” he says.

“So we are bastard children?” She’s getting teary.

“Your brother is mine, I got a confirmation of that even though your mother doesn’t know. But you’re not mine by blood, only by marriage and tradition. So don’t stand there and talk about your mother as if she’s been a saint. I’m bringing a good woman who will know how to be a good mother to you before you fall pregnant with another child on top of this one,” he says.

“So I’m not your child, only Sekhona and Salo are?” Her whole body is shaking,

there's a flood of tears on her face. Why does she have to find out like this? Who is her father if she's not a Mhlongo.

“Sbonga...” By the time Babo turns and tries to walk after her, she's already ran into her room and locked the door.

“I didn't mean to say it that way, I'm just frustrated, I don't want anything to go wrong,” he says.

The only thing he hears are loud sobs. This is bad, he wasn't supposed to just spill it like that, he was going to find a perfect time one day and lay out the truth in a sensitive manner. This is his daughter regardless of her DNA, he raised her and wants only the best for her.

“Please open the door, let me explain,” he pleads

“Go away!” she’s crying.

He heaves a sigh and leaves.

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SALO MHLONGO

To put everyone at ease I didn’t pack everything, I left some things to occupy the room I can proudly say is mine now.

Nkatha didn’t want me to drive myself, so he sent the driver with me. It’s the same one I got into trouble, I’m glad he still has his job.

I wheel my suitcase to the door, he takes them to my car outside. I have to and say goodbye to Zothani's parents, they've done a lot for me and allowed me to heal in their space. Zothani didn't leave me alone, he left me with a son, a brother and a new mom and dad.

Mam' Zungu has made an effort to sit without leaning. She's smiling, there's a rare glow on her face. I sit next to her, she holds my hand.

"This feels like when Zothani left for university. It was like he was never coming back," she says.

"No Ma, I'm definitely going to come and visit as frequent as I can," I say.

“I know, my child. I just wish you could’ve stayed forever, your presence closed the gap Zothani left us with. Nkatha will go back to his house, Nokwanda is busy with her studies and friends, it will feel like I have no child,” she says.

Now I feel bad, maybe I should let my father single-handedly handle his daughter and stay here.

Bab’ Zungu chuckles and draws my attention to him.

“Don’t mind her, we will be fine, don’t feel guilty about having to go home when there are things that need your attention there,” he says.

Mam’ Zungu scoffs, “You sit outside the whole day watching cars, I will be lonely.”

“Ma don’t be dramatic, she’s not leaving the country,” Nkatha says walking in. He’s changed his pants and shoes. He’s now wearing sneakers and three-quarter pants. He looks different when he’s casual.

“I’m just not used to the house without her anymore. Otherwise I wish her a safe trip, I’m glad she cooked me the soup before leaving,” she says, laughing and coughing in between.

I don’t know when was the last time I gave my own mother a hug, but I hug her. She embraces me, I feel the little kick and let out a giggle.

“Wait, did he kick?” Nkatha asks.

“Typically calculated Zungu,” I say.

Everyone laughs, then an argument starts. Nkatha wants everyone to agree that the baby will come out looking and acting like him, which I pray doesn't happen.

Then his father asks the big question, "When are you getting a wife? Nokwanda needs a sibling, she's old now."

Awkwaaaard!

"Soon," he says.

I hold myself from laughing. Soon? He can't even get a date right.

"I thought we would've met Lerato by now," his father continues to say.

This time I fail to hold myself, I laugh out loud thinking about his face during the date with Lerato. Man wasn't impressed with anything, not even her twenty layers of

make-up. I don't think he will ever fall in love intentionally. It will be something that will happen accidentally, that even if the woman has all the turn-offs and shows up two hours late he won't be able to help himself.

"Let me walk you out," he says to me.

He wants me to save him. I stand up and give Mam' Zungu one last hug.

"Get better Ma," I say and turn to say goodbye to Bab' Zungu.

Now back to the four-walls I grew up in. I will miss the warm atmosphere in the afternoons, laughter during dinner, and yes being the center of attention. Here I was what everyone treated like a fragile glass, I didn't have any responsibilities, not even

washing my own spoon. Everyone confirmed if I was comfortable before doing anything, I was no one's problem-solver. I wish it wasn't temporary, or maybe that I could have gotten a chance to choose where I come from. But I don't have that privilege, I have to go and continue where I left off. The mess I left is still lying at the door, waiting for me to sweep it off.

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NONDUMEZULU

I have missed Aunt Teekay, I'm guilty about what happened between us prior to her leaving, that's why I'm trying to make

this day extra special for her. I have cooked her favorite homemade bread, lamb chops and spinach. I hope I got the bread right, I don't know how many times she taught me how to bake it growing up.

My mother walks in, she's been crying of hunger for hours. We are waiting for Aunt Teekay with her guest, I can't open my dishes without them.

"Nzuzo's father just called me," she says.

God, I hope he wasn't reporting the fight I had with him.

"What did he say?" I ask.

"He asked for his sizes and said he will bring him clothes later today," she says.

“Oh wow!” I’m just surprised, I thought he’d be his usual self and try to make my life difficult.

“I think he will personally come here, I hope there won’t be any misunderstanding,” my mother says, she’s standing and looking at me.

“Nkalipho won’t be around, if that’s what you’re confirming, and even if he does see Solwazi here he won’t cause a scene, Solwazi doesn’t intimidate him,” I say. I don’t know how truthful my words are, but I trust Nkalipho now, he trusts me too.

“Is he well?” she asks.

“Yes, he’s okay, just dealing with family stuff,” I say.

“You two are still postponing going to church?” She asks but doesn’t wait for my answer. I’m left feeling bad actually, God has finally showed up for me but I haven’t given him a simple ‘thank you’. We should arrange again, this time I will make sure we go and maybe I will finally meet his father’s sister.

I’ve set the table, now I’m just waiting for the car to pull up outside. That’s me assuming that she’s bringing a guest that drives. Nzuzo runs in screaming.

“Aunt Teekay! Gogo!”

Sometimes he gets confused about how to address Aunt Teekay. He imitates me or remembers that it’s gogo to him. I leave

everything and rush to the door. It's a quantum parked outside, I can't believe she's coming with a taxi driver. It's a tall man walking behind her; dark to the bone but not so bad looking.

“Ya mkhulu,”

Jesus Christ! I turn and pull his hand. This man could be not comfortable with being referred to as a grandfather, he doesn't look old at all.

But he smiles, “Boy boy.”

I loosen the grip around Nzuzo's hand.

“Are you going to take Aunt Teekay away?”

Aung Teekay pulls him from my hand and lifts him to his hip.

“Yoh, why are you so heavy now? What does mommy feed you?”

“Mommy doesn’t feed me, gogo feeds me noodles,” Nzuzo says.

One thing about kids, they will embarrass you. Now I look like a bad mother who never feed her child in front of a guest.

“Hello,” I greet.

“Hi Nondu,” the man says, smiling.

This time around Aunt Teekay went for looks.

“Lume says ‘I love you Ndume, yezwa’,” Nzuzo says. He knows he’s saying the wrong things, he hides his face on her shoulder and giggles.

I don't know what has gotten into him, that has nothing to do with this conversation.

Aunt Teekay is laughing, we are making our way inside the house.

“Do you like Lume?” she asks him.

“Yes, but my baba doesn't.” He shakes his head to emphasize his father part. Trust Solwazi to make it obvious even to a child.

“But Lume sleeps with mommy in the bed and says ‘thandwa sam’.”

Okay this is it. I pull him from Aunt Teekay's arms, she's laughing her lungs out.

I take him with me to the kitchen, I can't really reprimand him because he's Nzuzo. I can only bribe his silence with a packet of chips. He needs to focus on something else

and stop telling Aunt Teekay about me and Nkalipho.

We all sit around the table, the man is next to Aunt Teekay with his hand linked to hers. We just want to know who he is, what he does for a living and what they're here to announce.

“This is Khulekani Magagula, the one I've been urged to look for my whole life,” she says.

Wait, does she mean he's her man, as in partner? She's settling down and ready to become family with him even if she can't have a child.

“Thembelihle...” my mother starts with a sigh.

“He knows everything, he loves me as I am, and so do I.” They look at each other, he cracks a thin smile before taking his eyes off her.

“Are you sure about this or it’s just another situation?” My mother though, she’s going to make him think she was once a player.

“Yes, him and I have plans for the future. Which is why we are here, I wanted to introduce him to you guys, just to let you know that I’m safe where I am and I’m happy in this new life that I’ve started,” she says.

I believe her. Hashtag-I stand with Aunt Teekay.

“In that case, I’m happy to meet you Khulekani. Welcome to the family this is

my grandson Nzuzo. And that's my daughter, Nondumezulu. You're lucky you found her home, she's usually with her boyfriend. She's a lab technician." I thought she was bashing me for spending more time with Nkalipho than I do with her, but now it sounds like she's bragging. I hope she doesn't do this with everyone because I don't need new witches in my life.

"Nice to meet you all, I've been told so much about this family, I couldn't wait to see you," Malum' Khulekani says coming and shaking each of our hand. He looks like a decent man, Aunt Teekay preferred not to tell us what he does for a living. But we have a lifetime to find out, this is a relationship they have big future plans for.

I fetch water from the kitchen and offer to everyone to wash their hands. Then I come back to dish, I'm the hostess.

“Nondu, how much butter did you put in the dough?” Aunt Teekay has started. She's a guest, she can't be questioning my bread before even tasting it.

Before I can give her a proper response someone knocks at the door. I ask Nzuzo to go and check who it is because my hands are occupied as the hostess.

It's someone Nzuzo knows, they're coming in and chatting.

“There's another mkhulu here,” I hear him saying as they get closer.

It sounds like he's coming with Babo. Why is he coming here? He was here this

morning and we gave him full breakfast.

Mam' Busi was hospitalized for being a witch and Sbonga is pregnant and lazy. I'm not going to judge her, I made the same mistake and fell pregnant while I was still in high school. But hey, this is the same shit her mother mocked me for, I wonder how she'd feel if she was around. I bet she would've found a million excuse for her daughter, maybe even say I set a bad example to the whole community.

I can see Aunt Teekay's displeasure. I think my mother randomly told Babo that she'd be home today, that's why he's walking in with a bunch of flowers.

This is going to be awkward.

“Thembelihle sthandwa sami,” he says.

Nzuzo runs to me and pulls my arm.

“Hey, go and sit,” I whisper.

He shakes his head and lifts his arms for me to pick him. I can’t wait for him to have a sibling in two years time, that’s when he will realize that he can’t be a baby forever. No doesn’t mean no to him, it means nag and cry until you get a yes.

I lift him up because I don’t want his drama to get in the way of the drama.

“Hi Delani,” Aunt Teekay says.

That’s not even friendzoning, he’s simply a person she knows.

“Thank you for coming back,” Babo says.

Doesn’t he see the Malum’ Khulekani?

“How is your wife?” Aunt Teekay asks.

“I will explain later, but she’s not in the picture anymore, I’m glad God brought you back. What is Khulekani doing here? You don’t need a body guard anymore.”

Oh, he knows Malum’ Khulekani. Even more interesting!

“Khulekani and I are together, he’s not my body guard, he’s my man.”

I never thought humans can blink tens times in a second. Babo is hurt and confused at the same time.

“No, it can’t be. I hired him to make sure that you were safe while you were at the Magagulas being treated,” he says, his voice breaking.

“Now he’s determined to do that for the rest of his life, Delani. But I will thank you

for bringing someone like him into my life. If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have known this kind of love and happiness and..." Is he okay?

"Babo!" I yell.

He falls.

I put Nzuzo on the chair and rush to him. It doesn't look like he's breathing.

"Mama, he's not breathing," I'm freaking out.

I look up thinking someone is coming with water or something, but everyone is still sitting where I left them. What is wrong with these people? Babo just fainted, he needs help.

"Mama please help, he fainted," I'm trying to fan his face but my hands are shaking.

Wait, they're eating bread? Are they out of their minds.

“Mama you're a church-going woman, you can't be eating bread while Babo is lying here.” I don't like him but he's still my uncle. I can't let him die here, I need them to help me help him.

“I'm not just a church-going woman, I'm a widow and a single mother too. This bread tastes nice, your cooking skills have improved since you met Nkalipho.” She's dipping a chunk of bread in a soup. I thought she had forgiven them, she acted like everything was cool and even reprimanded me when I acted some type of way towards them. I can't believe the side of her I'm seeing.

“Aunt Teekay? Malum’ Khulekani?” I’m hopeless now, it doesn’t look like they’re prepared to help either. I understand Malum’ Khulekani, this is his competitor.

“Are you a nurse now Nondu? I thought you studied the laboratory job,” Aunt Teekay asks.

“We can’t just sit as if nothing is happening,” I say.

“Right, call the ambulance and stop acting like a nurse. Your spinach tastes better than mine, that boy must marry you already.” Her and my mother laugh.

They’re mean sisters.

“Mommy, I want to poop,” Nzuzo says, jumping off the chair and holding his little butt.

**Is his poop more important than Babo's
life?**

“Mommy!” he starts crying.

“Nondumezulu hhayi bo!” – my mother.

**I grab the jug of juice and pour it on Babo's
face, then I grab my phone and dial the
ambulance while pulling Nzuzo to the
bathroom.**

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 69

SALO MHLONGO

I just saw an ambulance at Nondu's gate, I'm getting my luggage inside the house and rushing there to check what's going on. I found the door open but nobody seems to be home. Maybe they are at Nondu's house attending to whoever has fallen sick. I want to leave my phone in the charger, as I connect it I hear sobs coming from one of the rooms.

"Sbonga?" I leave the phone lying next to the charger.

She's inside her room, sobbing painfully. We are not on good terms, I haven't spoken to her since yesterday, but she's pregnant, she shouldn't be crying like this.

“Please come,” she says, crying.

I try to open the door but it’s locked inside.

“Unlock the door,” I say.

“I can’t...move,” she cries.

Alarms go off, I start kicking the door. I don’t know why she can’t move, or where my father is, all I know is that I need to get inside this room and save my sister from whatever is holding her inside.

“Salo,” the voice says behind me.

I turn, I long forgot about Gatsheni, the driver. He moves me aside and asks what’s happening. I explain to him that my sister is inside needing help. He doesn’t break the door, he asks for a knife and puts it in the keyhole. It’s so easy for him to unlock the

door with a knife, South Africa is not safe
shame.

Sbonga is lying on the bed, there's blood on
the sheets.

“Sbonga what's going on?” I'm freaking
out.

She's pregnant, she's not supposed to be
bleeding.

“I'm in pain,” she cries.

I don't think she can say more than that,
she's breathing heavily.

“Are you having a miscarriage?” I just want
a yes or no, then I will know what to do.

Shit, how is a 16 year old supposed to know
if she's having a miscarriage. This is her
first pregnancy.

“Do you have a clinic card?” I’m running to her table.

“No,” she groans.

I’m going to have a shitty day with the nurses today. Gatsheni carries her to the car, I grab only my purse and follow after them. I have no idea where my father is, his daughter is here dying, I’m heavily pregnant and doing his job.

I don’t know where Nondu came from, I didn’t even know she was home. She’s panting like she’s been running miles.

“Salo, you need to come,” she says.

“I can’t, I’m taking Sbonga to the clinic.” I don’t even have time to ask why there’s an

ambulance at her gate, I'm in no position to help.

"Someone has to go with Babo to the clinic," she says.

Now wait a minute...

"To the clinic?" I ask.

"He fainted, he still hasn't woken up. I can't go, I don't know shit about his health history and whatever questions they're going to ask. My mother doesn't want to go, neither does Aunt Teekay," she says.

I lean by the car and breathe. A few long breaths. If it was up to me I'd faint as well, maybe wake up next month.

"I think Sbonga is having a miscarriage, I have to rush her to the clinic," my voice is faint. I don't have a lot of energy. "She's

my priority, he fainted at your house, it's none of my business.”

“What? He's your father, Salo.”

For someone who's good with academics, Nondu can be very slow.

“I'm not coming,” I tell her.

“Who's supposed to go with him then?”

I open the door and get inside the car.

“Please go Gatsheni,” I say, taking my sister's hand and holding it. She's in a lot of pain, I pray we get there on time, I don't want her to lose the baby.

Gatsheni drives off, Nondu will lock the gate and see what she does with her uncle.

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NONDUMEZULU

Salo is pregnant and crazy. How can she say her father is none of her business? Babo is not my father, why is he my responsibility now? I know there's nothing that is going to change my mother's mind. She's been holding grudges, I don't know when she turned this cold. I can't even blame her, she's been through a lot of pain because of Babo and Mam' Busi. I'm not even going to put much blame on her, she's a Khumalo by blood, he's the one who was supposed to look out for his family and protect his brother.

I have no choice but to leave everyone on the table, enjoying like nothing is wrong. I even forget to tell them about Sbonga, I slide into a dress and rush to the ambulance. I can't believe I'm fighting for my father's killer's life. If this doesn't give me a free pass to heaven I don't know what will.

We get to the clinic, they register him with the limited personal information and attend to him immediately. I'm not sure if Sbonga and Salo are here as well, I saw the car outside but I don't see them. I'm worried about Sbonga, she's just a child who made a mistake, despite of who her parents are, she doesn't deserve this.

I'm waiting on the chairs, the nurse who's been helping since we got here with the ambulance comes to me. Babo is having is awake but he has a weak pulse, they're transferring him to the hospital. This is getting worse than I thought. I'm trying to call Salo but she's not answering. I don't have to go to the hospital with Babo, I can go home after everything has been concluded. But this needs his family now. I ask if I can see him before they take him to the ambulance going to Stanger.

He's awake, he looks okay, I don't know how his heart is failing to pump enough blood and beating faintly. I mean, he only fainted, it wasn't that serious.

"How are you feeling Babo?" I ask.

He's lying on a stretcher bed, I don't know if his memory is still clear of what happened before he fainted.

He gives me a slight nod, he's okay.

"Do you remember what happened?" I ask.

"Your aunt betrayed me," he says.

Seriously, he's married, what does he mean? He's been betraying people since the beginning of times.

"You're going to the hospital, I don't know if Salo and Sbonga..." No, I shouldn't be telling him this while he's in this critical condition. "They will come after you," I lie.

Salo didn't seem to care, I don't think they will be following up.

The taxi drops me off, I walk up to the gate and notice the X6 parked. I forgot about this fucker coming here. I think he's not talking to me, hence he communicated with my mother about Nzuzo's sizes. Guess what, I wouldn't care even if we never exchanged words for the rest of our lives. He's okay communicating with my mother, at least he won't disrespect her.

The quantum has left, I'm sad Aunt Teekay didn't wait for me to come back. But they're going to visit again and be around more often. Babo ruined a family reunion.

I feel heavy walking in to Solwazi sitting on the couch with Nzuzo and shopping bags all over the floor. I don't know whether to greet or walk straight to my room.

“Mommy look,” Nzuzo.

He lifts a pair of Nike sneakers. It’s original, unlike the one I bought for him at the free market. There are more shoe boxes on the floor, and other branded clothing bags. I have to smile and compliment my son.

Then I look at him and greet. Unbelievably, he responds.

My mother is sitting opposite them, she looks happy.

“Boy, do you want us to connect the truck before I leave?” he asks Nzuzo.

“I want the real truck,” Nzuzo says.

He smiles, “You want to ride a real truck?”

“Yes,” Nzuzo.

Really this child!

“Okay, tomorrow I will fetch you and we will go and see where big trucks are made. We will ask permission from gogo,” he says.

I’m being excluded, poor me. I don’t even think Nzuzo will be interested in the trucks tomorrow, he’s just curious because of the toy one he’s seeing. This one is trying to be a superman- giving Nzuzo everything he wants.

I don’t say anything, I go to my room and try Salo one more time.

This time it goes through.

“I’ve been calling you sisi, Babo was taken to the hospital. How’s Sbonga?”

“She lost the baby,” she’s crying.

“That’s sad, where is she?”

“We are still at the clinic,” she says.

“I’m very sorry, I didn’t mean to stress you out, I just didn’t know what to do with Babo.” I hate to say this, but I wish Mam’ Busi was here.

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SALO MHLONGO

It’s 9pm, we got home 20 minutes ago.

I’m tired, I need my bed but I can’t go to sleep right away. I still need to talk to Sbonga, she’s tired too but it’s important that I go to bed with closure. Did she do something on purpose? I don’t understand.

Yes, I shouted and scolded her with painful words, but I was going to be there for her and she knows that very well.

“Are you sad?” I know the question may sound insensitive.

“I don’t know,” she says.

There wasn’t adequate counseling she received, the clinic was too busy.

“Did you do something?”

She looks away, “No.”

“I don’t know what to think. Why did you lock the door? What were you doing inside the room alone, not wanting anyone to disturb you?” I ask.

“I didn’t want dad...your dad, to come and talk to me.”

“Why?” I ask.

“He said I’m not his biological child, mom cheated.”

That’s crazy, she’s either lying or my father has a loose screw in his head.

Sbonga can see that I don’t believe her.

“He was cleaning the bedroom, as you can see my mother’s stuff is no longer there, he took out everything. I told him I wasn’t going to allow any woman to come and take my mother’s place, that’s when he told me that mom cheated too. Sekho and I were sent to the Khumalos often because mom doubted our paternity and wanted us to stay away during ceremonies and stuff. I don’t know how he confirmed Sekhona, but I’m not his child.”

That's a big thing to tell a 16 year old like that. Even if she wasn't his daughter, telling her like that was very cruel of him and I don't think this is something I can forgive.

"I drank Stametta, I wasn't thinking clear, I just wanted to get one problem out of the way and suffer alone," she says.

I don't know how to react, she purposely terminated the pregnancy, not even safely. How can she make such decision in a few hours, without talking to anyone.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I don't think she understands the emotional burden they put on me. If I didn't get here on time she could've died in this room, that was very immature and stupid of her.

“Are you glad that you’re no longer pregnant?” I ask.

“I don’t know if I’m glad, I just want to sleep and wake up tomorrow to wait for mom to tell me who my father is,” she says, closing her eyes.

My phone beeps, I check it and find multiple missed calls and texts from Nkatha.

He’s just worried about me, asking if I’m okay and managing. I reply saying everything is okay, but in reality they’re far from okay. I feel a slight twinge of pain around my abdomen, I need to rest.

Tomorrow I will go to the hospital and check Delani. Everything is a mess, and the people who are responsible for it are not

**here to take responsibility, they're lying
comfortably in the hospital beds and
getting free food and treatment.**

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 70

SALO MHLONGO

**I gave birth two weeks ago, my son is
healthy and bouncing despite him coming**

earlier than expected. I thought I was just feeling normal fatigue pain, but it was consistent for three days. I ended up reporting to Nkatha, and I had to go to the hospital. MaNkosi took Sbonga in, my father was discharged but he only showed his face at home once and left. I don't know where he is and I don't care. Sbonga is going back to school soon, she's healed and she received proper counseling, she's doing okay now.

Honestly, I don't think she was ready for a baby. She doesn't like babies, that includes my little Khayalami. I have to beg for her to look after him if I'm going to the bathroom. The most useless aunt in the world award goes to her.

“Why don’t we visit mom?” she asks.

“I have a little baby Sbonga.” Actually I don’t fancy chilling with mad people.

“Do you know when she might come home?”

“I don’t know, I don’t care. I only care about you, Sekhona and Khayalami. She might come back and run away too, just like her husband,” I say.

“You think they really practiced witchcraft?” She’s whispering.

It’s a weird thing to think of your parents. But they confessed, what more proof do I need?

“They sure did, we just didn’t see them doing it,” I say.

“Why didn’t they get me muthi to pass all the subjects without studying though?”

Gosh, my pussy just got intact after the stitches, I’m still scared to laugh too loud.

She sits, “I’m serious, why not practice witchcraft that makes sense? Like confusing Lottery balls and ATMs. Their witchcraft didn’t pay off, look at us, we’ve turned into orphans, people talk about our family everywhere, I’ve lost all my childhood friends, I will never get my local crush because of this label.”

“It is what it is, we are going to move away from all of this,” I say.

“Move away?” She frowns.

I haven’t really let it sink in myself, I didn’t want to get carried away and lose focus on

being a mom to my son. I want to enjoy being a mom without distractions that come with money.

“I’m house-hunting in Tongaat, I’m looking for a family house with enough space for all of us. You, Sekhona, Khayalami and me,” I say.

“You’re still on maternity leave, where did you get the money?” She’s confused.

“I have an income, not from my job. I also have a lot of money that was sent to me after I gave birth.”

“By the Zungus?” Her eyes widen.

I laugh, “Yes, I’m not saying go around telling people that I have money. But we will leave this place and start over,

Sekhona and I have made a lot of plans for the future.”

“So we are disowning ourselves?” she asks.

“No, we are removing ourselves from the toxic environment. Home is where the heart is, and ours is no longer here. They will always be mom and dad, but it doesn’t mean we have to be around them,” I say.

“If there’s a pool I will come,” she says.

I roll my eyes, she’s still a broke girl who’s into finer things that that she can’t personally afford.

I’m tired of eating take-outs, today I’m protesting and demanding a home cooked meal. MaNkosi said I can’t cook before Khayalami turns 1 month old, I’m using

that to my advantage and enjoying every moment of Sbonga doing everything around the house. She's cooking chicken and vegetables. No originality, she's reading Google recipes and listening to Doja Cat while cooking.

There's a knock at the door, Sbonga is cooking and I'm I'm feeding the baby.

"Come in," I say.

Bab' Shange opens the door and walks in. I haven't seen this face in a long time, I last saw him during the fake memorial service. He's carrying a familiar bag.

"You're both home," he sounds relieved.

"Is that..." Yes, it's Busisekile's bag.

She's walking in after him, looking pale

I wasn't expecting this, it's her house but I'm shocked that she's here.

Sbonga is shocked too. We are looking at her like an alien just walked in.

Shange leaves her bag on the table and quickly walks out. How did he know she was discharged? Is it not dodgy that his friend is not around and he's taking care of his wife.

Nobody says hello. After a staring contest between her and I, she looks at Khayalami on my arms and then starts crying. Sbonga and I remain still, how and why would we comfort her?

“What did I do to be hated by my own children so much?”

Silly me for thinking she was crying out of remorse for everything she's done. Typical Busisekile, everything is about her.

“Not even one visit!” She's still forcing out crocodile tears.

Does she even know the kind of challenges we've faced in her absence? Her madness was the least of our concern, really.

We don't have to respond, she wipes her face and looks around, for her husband I think.

“Where's your father?” she asks.

Sbonga responds; “We don't know, we haven't seen him in almost two weeks.”

“Did you look for him?” she asks.

Sbonga looks at me, I remain silent.

“No, we thought he’s an adult, he packed a bag and left. He doesn’t even know that Salo has given birth and I’m no longer pregnant,” Sbonga tells her.

“You were pregnant?” She raises her brows.

“Yes, but I miscarried,” Sbonga. She clears her throat and looks at me.

I’m not going to say anything, everyone thinks she miscarried and that’s what we will let them think.

“Good!” mom says.

She’s still who she was.

“And is the baby okay?” She finally acknowledges her grandchild.

“Yes,” I nod.

“Can I see him?”

God intervene!

“Now?” I ask.

“Yes, he must take blessings from his grandmother before I go look for his whoring grandfather.”

Okay, that’s the language used in front of Sbonga now, okay.

I give her the baby, I doubt she has any blessings to give anyone but whatever. My heart is racing as she touches Khayalami’s head, I don’t know where those hands have been. She holds him for less than three minutes and brings him back. Finding indoda is a top priority, grandson can wait.

She grabs her bag and goes to her bedroom. It's empty like her husband's head, it's about to get chaotic in this neighborhood.

She comes back with her hands on her waist.

“Where are my things? Who changed my bedroom?”

“Your husband,” I say.

“What? Is he crazy? Where did he take my things?”

“Find him and ask him,” I say.

“You're damn right, kuzoshipha unondindwa namhlanje, I won't be done like that. He thought I wasn't coming back, ushaye phansi ke!” She's yelling, making so much noise and swearing.

Khayalami starts crying. I was told babies are sensitive to negativity. This is one of the reasons I'm moving out, my son can't grow in this kind of environment.

"Mom before you go..." Sbonga.

I raise my eyes from Khayalami to her. This can't be about what dad said, like seriously now is not the time. She just came back, she's dealing with her missing husband issue, it will be better to ask when they're together.

"Who is my father?" Sbonga asks.

I hold my breath, I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

Mom stops and looks back. I can see the shock and fear in her eyes. I don't think she

was ever crazy, it was her sins messing with her head.

“Did you really cheat?” Sbonga wants to know.

She’s holding a jug of water, I don’t know what she’s doing with so much water when cooking. I hope I don’t get a running stomach from what she’s cooking.

“Delani is your father,” mom says.

“But he said the opposite,” – Sbonga.

“He’s crazy, I hope Salo and her boyfriend take him to the mental institution as well.

That’s what they do best, right?” She turns her eyes to me.

I don’t respond, she walks out.

Sbonga is pouring water into the pot. A lot of it.

“Why are you pouring so much water? That food will be tasteless.”

“I have identity crisis, I don’t care,” she says.

Phewww! I look down at Khayalami, he’s calmed down.

My multi-million rand baby. What a dysfunctional family he was born into!

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NONDUMEZULU

It took a lot of convincing for Nkalipho to go and have drinks with Dr Manzini. I wanted them to link up badly, but now I'm starting to regret it. It's almost 8pm, they've been gone since 3pm and I'm not getting neither of them on the phone. What kind of drinks make it hard for them to pick their fuckin' phones? I send Nkalipho a threatening text.

I'm distracted from my anger by Salo's message. She's sent me a picture of her son. I haven't had a chance to meet him. He's two weeks old now, he's all Nkatha talks about at work. He was in the delivery room when he came, I don't know how Salo survived that.

I end up texting back and forth with Salo, she's telling me they're house-hunting, her and her siblings. I don't ask a lot of questions, I know the situation at home. Babo got back from the hospital after being cleared and disappeared. I think he's running away from his sins. I don't know how long he thinks he's going to run. He's going to have to live with the fact that he killed his own brother for the rest of his life. His pillar is not there to comfort him, now he understands that nobody wants to be associated with him, especially not Aunt Teekay.

There's a car driving in, I log out of Whatsapp and wait at the door. He's finally

here, the music is on and disturbingly loud. Gosh, he's drunk. But I endorsed it, I have to live with the consequences.

Okay, both of them are here. I don't know why Dr Manzini came as well, how is he going to get home because this one is going straight to bed. It's weird seeing my boss this drunk, they're singing along the music. I didn't know Nkalipho was a good dancer, he's got all the moves. I have no idea what Dr Manzini is doing, he's dancing like Ncandweni group members. I don't think they're coming inside anytime soon.

I go back and lie on the couch, I can't be freezing at the door while they're dancing. After three songs the music dies, I hear

them laughing their way in. Then someone opens the pots, obviously Nkalipho.

“Babeeeee,” he yells.

Gosh, I didn’t sign up for this.

“Lounge,” I say.

They’re now coming here.

Nkatha looks drunker than him. He’s unbuttoned his whole shirt and lifted the vest to his chest. I shouldn’t be seeing my boss’ belly.

“You know Nondu, right? She’s the one I’ve been telling you about,” Nkalipho asks.

“She works for me,” Dr Manzini chuckles.

They look at each other and realize a huge dead joke and laugh.

**“I invited him to my mother’s ceremony,”
Nkalipho tells me.**

**I wasn’t aware that we are issuing out
invites already. He decided he was going to
do the needed ceremony regardless of how
he feels about his mother and the
relationship he has with her family. It’s
happening end of the month, I’m helping
him with the arrangements, the first money
he gave to Mbali for the arrangements was
lost. Mbali got mugged coming from the
bank so she spent the next three days at
the tavern de-stressing, you get the drill.**

**He throws himself on the couch next to me.
Nkatha remains standing, his eyes are half-
shut.**

“I was telling him how amazing you are to me, the support and love that you give me,” he says.

I nod.

He goes on; “I’m not easy to tolerate but you’ve been patient with me. I’m going to do something big for you one of these days, I promise.”

“Buy her a watch, she’s always late,” Dr Manzini.

I’ve been late two times only, excluding the interview day.

“Don’t hold a grudge,” Nkalipho tells him.

“I’m not, how can I hold a grudge against someone so beautiful?”

Nkalipho gets closer and links his arm around my waist and kisses my cheek.

“He’s saying you’re beautiful.”

“I heard babe,” I say.

How awkward is this situation?

“If you weren’t a good guy I would’ve taken her,” Dr Manzini again.

Taken, like an item? Does he know how long it takes for me to be taken?

Nkalipho laughs, I don’t think it’s funny, I’m not comfortable with my boss saying that, drunk or not.

“You’re not her type,” Nkalipho says, still laughing.

“I don’t need to be,” Dr Manzini says, lowering himself to the couch.

“I would’ve judged her,” Nkalipho laughs louder.

This is not funny, but the way he said that is so light and hilarious.

But I have a feeling that Dr Manzini is not trying to be funny.

I clear my throat and ask, “Do you have transport to go home?”

“My driver is coming,” he says and closes his eyes.

I forget that he has money. I wish the driver can get here faster.

He opens his eyes, I was looking at him, I quickly look away.

I want to go to bed, I shake Nkalipho's shoulder, it looks like he's about to fall asleep.

"I'm going to sleep," I tell him.

"Don't sleep before I get there, there's something I want to show you." He smiles and bites his lower lip. He's cute, I'm just not comfortable being here so I don't respond.

"Goodnight," Dr Manzini says.

I look back, he said that with his eyes closed.

I hurry to my bedroom and close the door behind me.

I hope he's just drunk, I don't want to think he had funny ideas all this time.

Nkalipho is taking it lightly, probably because he's drunk. But I can't, not when I have to see him at work on Monday.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 71

NONDUMEZULU

It's almost an hour later when I hear the car driving off and footsteps coming to the bedroom. I couldn't sleep, I don't know why I'm failing to forget Dr Manzini's

words. I don't know if I can work comfortably on Monday with him if he doesn't apologize for what he said. I doubt he was too drunk, he will remember everything he did and said tomorrow morning.

After taking his shoes off, Nkalipho gets in bed. His body is cold, he shifts closer and holds me with his hands. I remain quiet, he kisses my forehead.

“Are you asleep ma?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

“I'm sorry I come to bed without taking a bath. I'm not smelling, am I?”

I can't help but laugh. He smells of alcohol, that's just it.

“How’s my butterfly?” He’s touching me all around the waist.

It was either he falls asleep right away or wants sex. That’s a drunk Nkalipho.

I let him hold me tighter, he rubs his erection against me and kisses me. Maybe sex will help me clear my head as well. I help him take off his pants and sits on his waist.

He suddenly looks sober, his hands are running on my hips. I lean down and kiss him.

Then I go down and take off his boxers and give him a head. His deep moans make me wet. I keep sucking him, his moaning is musical, I don’t pay attention to his groans that come when he’s about to cum. He

spills inside my mouth, almost shooting straight into my throat. I spit out right on the bed and rush to the bathroom to rinse my mouth.

I come back ready to ride him like a whore. Guess what, he's spread his legs to either sides of the bed and he's snoring peacefully. I'm left horny and burping sperms.

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I only slept around 11pm, I don't know what the time is but nobody should be woken up on a Sunday morning. Especially not by a horny man who had a chance last night and chose to fall asleep.

“Are you awake?” he asks, pushing his dick between my thighs.

“You woke me up, obviously I’m awake,” I say.

“I’m sorry, let me help you go back to sleep.” He slept drunk, he’s waking up with a boner and blank memory, I understand that. But I’m still angry about everything that happened last night.

“No,” I push his hand away.

My back is against him. Instead of letting go, he kisses the back of my neck and wraps his hands around my boobs. I’m really not in the mood for sex and he’s forcing his dick in, without permission or condom.

“Nkalipho...” He squeezes my nipples harder.

And pushes his dick between my butt cheeks, forcing it downwards.

“Nkalipho, I said no, don’t rape me.”

He pulls away quickly and lets go of me. I roll off the bed and grab my pyjamas on the floor and walk out. I know I’m acting dramatic and he doesn’t understand what’s going on. I’m angry at myself because I’m guilty. If Nkalipho wasn’t drunk last night there would’ve been a big fight. He had his observations about Dr Manzini. For a while he thought Dr Manzini was up to something and I fought with him for saying that and invited the person into his life. Now there’s a possibility that he could’ve been right and

I was just blind to it. What's going to happen the next time they get drunk, because that's when Dr Manzini has the guts to say something.

It's Sunday, he's not my boss today.

I send him a text, just telling him how disrespected I felt last night by everything he said. I expect him to text me back with an apology or denying saying it because of the drunken state he was in. But Dr Manzini blue-ticks me. Now I'm more furious, why is he not acknowledging my feelings? How are we supposed to work tomorrow?

Fine, I will take this to someone he can't blue-tick.

Salo, yeah I'm calling her.

She doesn't take long to answer.

"Hey sisi," I say.

"Hey are you okay?"

So I always call her for problems, I need to do better.

"I'm okay, but there's one thing that happened and stressed me out. Your brother-in-law," I say.

"Okay, what did he do?" she asks, sounding concerned.

"He went out with Nkalipho for drinks, I encouraged it. Then they came back drunk, he started saying things like how he would've taken me if I wasn't with Nkalipho, whether he's my type or not," I

say and realize how childish I actually sound. Like these are the kind of problems I have, really?

I hear her sigh, “I talked him out of those things. He was probably drunk, I’m sorry, I will talk to him and tell him you’re not comfortable.”

“Thank you very much. How’s Khayalami?”

“He’s awesome. I don’t know why you guys lie so much about motherhood. It’s not hard as everyone makes it to be,” she says.

“Can I roll my eyes first?” I ask.

She laughs, “Seriously, it’s not that hard for me.”

“Because you gave birth at Alberlito private hospital and you call his uncle if he coughs

and get a whole pharmacy delivered to your doorstep. Wait until he grows up and starts crying because you are walking out of the room,” I say.

“I’m sure that’s just another exaggeration, Khaya is a discipline child.” This girl is not in touch with reality yet.

“Wait, let me record this call, we will replay it in 6 months,” I say and we both laugh.

Motherhood is hard, but I guess not so much if you have moral and financial support. My mood is lighter after talking to her, I go back to the bedroom and find Nkalipho wrapped in the duvet.

I get in the bed and pull the duvet. He's not looking at me, no matter how close I get to his face.

“So Salo thinks motherhood is just a walk in the park, she says I exaggerated everything,” I tell him.

Silence.

Am I boring?

“I'm giving her 6 months,” I say.

He exhales and turns to sleep on his other side.

I guess he's angry about sex.

“Seriously Nkalipho, you're mad over sex?”

Nothing.

I hold his shoulder and look at his face from behind.

“I’m sorry ke,” I say.

“You’re not sorry Nondu, you wanted to hurt me with your words.” Oh Jesus Christ!

“How are you going to be hurt by a no?”

Sometimes I can’t deal with this guy.

“You said I wanted to rape you. Like how?

Why would you think of me that way?”

“Isn’t rape having sex with someone after they said no?” I ask.

“You’re not just someone, you’re my girlfriend and I was just trying to change your mind and get you in the mood. Rape is a big word to say to someone you love,” he says.

“Love, get it into your head that rape isn’t a big word, it’s someone having sex with a person who said no. That’s a term for it, I

don't have another vocabulary. But I will apologize for being cold and snappy. Last night I gave you a blowjob and you came inside my mouth and then dozed off without touching me," I say.

"So you woke up angry about something so stupid?" He's demeaning my feelings now.

"Whether you think it was stupid or not, it made me angry," I say.

"Don't lie Nondu, it's annoying. You never keep quiet and walk out on me over bad sexual experiences, that's one thing you're always vocal about." He fuckin' knows me so well.

I remove my hand from his shoulder, he turns and faces me.

“Tell me what I did last night. Did I offend you by something?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“Then what is it? Talk to me.”

He doesn't remember anything, I should be glad and keeping it that way. But if I don't tell him the truth he will ride his own anger wave, then it will be both of us angry, no one will beg and try to calm the other down.

“How drunk were you last night?” I ask.

“I understand you don't drink babe, but that's a senseless question,” he says.

Now it's him snapping at me for no good reason. Surely he can measure how drunk he was.

“You don’t remember Dr Manzini saying the things he said?” I ask.

“What things?” He frowns.

“Like if I wasn’t with you he was going to take me,” I say.

I can’t define the look on his face. But he’s not angry, thank God for that.

“I remember,” he says.

“And?” I mean it can’t be that he just remembers and there’s no emotion he’s attaching to it.

“And what?” he asks.

“Are you not angry?”

“No, I don’t want my woman to be umgodi onganukwanja.” It’s strange that now he approves of his girlfriend to be wanted by

other men. He was going crazy over a bunch of flowers I was asked to take to the hospital, I know exactly how he is.

“Then that contradicts everything you’ve said about yourself, how you are as a person, and pretty much how you’ve shown your character to me,” I say.

“What do you mean? I’ve never said don’t get compliments from people.”

“Your tone has told me that though. I woke up stressed and angry at myself for allowing Dr Manzini to say that to me. I texted him and demanded an apology, he didn’t respond to me, so I took the matter to Salo. All because I was guilty, I didn’t want you to be angry, I don’t want us to

fight and I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"That's bullshit!" He places the pillow on his face. I don't know why he's surprised and angry. I acted according to the tone he's set in this relationship. Almost everyday Nkalipho has told me about his insecurities, I'm trying to make this a safe space for him.

"If you weren't drunk last night, were we not going to fight?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, he knows that I'm not lying.

He removes the pillow and exhales heavily.

"Am I wrong?" I ask.

"How do you think all this makes me look Nondu? You're telling people to apologize

for basically complimenting you.” He’s glaring at me, his eyes are getting teary.

I don’t know how I’m at fault here.

“It’s a reflection of who you are, I’m just being a careful girlfriend. Is that wrong?”

“Yes, it’s wrong. I’m wrong, if that’s how you feel like you have to act to make me happy, I’m fuckin’ wrong. If you feel guilty that you’re beautiful and liked, then I’m a monster.”

“You’re not a monster,” I try to hold his hand but he prefers to scratch his head.

“I wasn’t trying to make you look that way, I simple didn’t want us to fight or for you to feel like I disrespected you,” I say.

“I never wanted you to feel that way.” He’s hurt by this, I can see that. “I’m not

denying what I said or how I acted, I'm just hurt it has gotten this far. I'm working on myself everyday, I know how I am as a person and I explain myself for you to understand why I act the way I do. Not to drag you down to my level, I don't want you caught up in the middle of my struggles."

"But we fight Nkalipho, I've lost count of how many times we've fought ever since we got together. I don't like fighting with you, hence I'm doing everything I can to avoid it," I say.

He exhales heavily and nods. Then he pulls me into his arms and wraps them tightly around me.

"I trust you," he says.

I'm relieved to hear him say that, and I believe it this time.

"I don't want you to be like a chained dog, loving me shouldn't take your freedom away. Nkatha is not a bad person, it's okay if he finds you attractive, as long as he doesn't touch what's mine. He will find love again, he just has to open up to it."

It sounds like they didn't just drink alcohol, they talked too.

"Is he looking?" I ask.

"Everyone wants him to look, but I think he's looking for someone he lost already and she's not going to come back through other people because she passed away," he says.

“That’s sad, no wonder he’s that uptight.”

I’m sad for him, I can’t imagine the pain of losing a partner. I don’t think it’s an easy thing to move on from.

“He will loosen up soon, he has a little baby to be a father to now,” he says.

“But him and Salo won’t be together, he’s just fathering Khaya,” I say.

“I doubt they will be, he wouldn’t be able to take her panties off, I think he respects her way too much for that. But raising a baby will heal him.”

“I wish I was respected like that too, having someone who can’t even take my panties off because of the respect they have for me.”

He bursts into laughter, “Make peace with that, I will always take your panties off, as long as I get a yes.”

Such a fast learner, I’m an impressed teacher.

My phone beeps, I check and it’s Salo’s texts. She’s forwarding me messages from Nkatha, he’s apologizing to her and blaming everything on the alcohol. She demanded that he comes and apologizes to me and Nkalipho as well, and he agreed with no hustles. It’s no longer necessary, but I’m glad now I know where to knock to get his respect.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 72

SALO MHLONGO

I swear this baby just wants to prove me wrong to Nondu. He's been a calm baby for two weeks straight, crying only when he needs a nappy change or needs to be fed. But today he woke up on a single crying contest. MaNkosi has been in town since morning, my mother is husband-hunting, I have no one to ask advice from. It's Monday, Nkatha is working and I hate reporting every little thing and bothering him. But I'm trying to be financially wise, I

can't pay R400 to a random doctor whereas I can get free examination and medication from his uncle.

He answers after a few rings, I swear his finger is always on the answering button.

"Khaya," he says.

I roll my eyes, he says this everytime I call.

"It's Salo, I'm related to him though," I say.

"Oh, how are you?" he asks.

Before I tell him I'm exhausted and stressed, he hears Khaya crying.

"Is that him crying?" he asks.

"Yes, he's been crying all morning, I don't know what's wrong with him."

"Is his temperature okay?"

"Yes, he's fine," I say.

“What colour is his stool? Is it watery?”

This is a strange stage of life, discussing the colour of feaces, really.

“It’s not watery but there’s something that looks like mucus in it,” I say.

“Ummm, that’s normal in teething babies because they drool a lot. He’s too young, with him it could be an infection or allergy. I will come later, don’t give him any milk from on, make him salt-sugar solution,” he says.

“Okay thanks, I’m sorry to disturb you at work.”

“It’s you, you can call at anytime. Your sister has been giving me a cold shoulder even though I sent heartfelt apologies and talked to Nkalipho over the phone.” He

doesn't have the sorry thing in his voice. I don't know if Nkalipho was offended as Nondu either. I mean they even talked over the phone, obviously Nkalipho is cool. But if Nondu was offended, then I'm on her side.

"You're her boss, maybe she's just trying to be professional," I say.

"The latecomer being professional? If she was, she would've been here early for work." This one is just trying to find ways to fault Nondu for the things he said to her.

"Please leave her alone," I say.

He laughs. He's not even a playful person but with this matter he's turning into a king of banter. I think he likes pressing people's

corners, Nondu's hothead is what excites him.

"You can find someone else to play with. I will create another profile for you, this time in a hook up app," I say.

"Hhayi bo, yey. I have left your sister alone, I wasn't even serious about what I said, I was drunk, she's a drama queen. Anyway why are you an expert in these dating apps?"

"How am I an expert now?" Imihlola le, I've only created an account once and it was for him.

"You know all these shitty apps. Dating apps, now hook-up apps. I hope you know you can't date before Khaya turns 5," he says.

I wasn't thinking about dating anytime soon. I don't know if I will be able to date again and fall in love. But 5 years, lol.

"Don't laugh, I don't want him to be confused," he's hilarious.

"Okay, I will wait for him to be 5 years old. Or even 19, like you and Nokwanda."

"Even more perfect, it's not like you will die," he says, he actually believes me.

I'm rolling my eyes to the heaven. I do think it's going to be hard for me to date, I will probably have to date someone he approves of. That's basically how our relationship is, one of the requirements for dating him is that the woman must like me. Lerato didn't like me at first sight and her number was deleted an hour later.

Khaya is crying his little lungs out, his aunt is next to him and scrolling down on Instagram.

“I was on the phone, couldn’t you hold him a bit?”

“I told him to keep quiet,” she says.

This girl forgets that month end she will asking cosmetics from me. I’m not saying she must be Khaya’s nanny, but helping me here and there won’t make her Instagram account disappear.

“Can you boil water for me? I need to make salt-sugar solution for him,” I ask.

She drags herself off the couch and goes to the kitchen. I know if Sekhona was around he would’ve been more helpful. He’s too

mature for his age, I love my brother, he didn't take anything after our parents. I was tempted to tell the Zungus to come and pay the damages to him instead of waiting for the two imbeciles that gave birth to me. I registered Khaya as a Zungu at Home Affairs, I don't know when my parents are going to be sane enough for a sit-down with the Zungus.

Sbonga was kind enough to make the salt-sugar solution, I fed Khaya and he fell asleep. Because I know Sbonga will clean the house all day, I picked the broom and gave her the mop. We are both cleaning while the pot of rice boils on the stove.

There's a car pulling up outside.

I check and see that it's Bab' Shange's van.

He's here alone, I thought he was bringing his best friend's wife home.

He walks in, "Girls, is mom home?"

This is getting very suspicious, given that he's my father's friend and he hasn't been home for two weeks. Instead of worrying about his friend, he's worried about his wife.

"No, she's looking for her husband," I say.

"Oh, I thought she'd be home." His eyes wander and land on Sbonga for a good minute.

I think it's just my mind playing on what I've been thinking about since Sbonga lost the baby. There's nothing wrong with Bab' Shange looking at Sbonga. He's like an

uncle to us, he's been there since we were young.

"Have you dropped out of school?" he asks.

Sbonga looks up, "No, I'm leaving Sunday."

"Okay, I heard that you had an unfortunate accident. I'm sorry about that." He says and looks at me, "Did mom say anything about cleansing her?"

"No," I say.

I don't know why he thinks Busisekile cares about those type of things.

"I can take her to a person who will cleanse her before she goes back to school. She can't leave with a dark aura, it might hinder her in her studies," he's got a point. But I think this should be handled by my parents.

“I’m still just a sister to her, you will have to discuss that with dad when he’s back. I don’t know anything about things like that, so I can’t permit to them,” I say.

“I prefer to talk to your uncle,” he says.

I wasn’t aware of the friendship between him and my uncle.

“You have his number?” I’m quite surprised.

“Yes,” he says.

I look at Sbonga, she’s moving the mop with one hand and scrolling down her phone with the other. This is about her but she doesn’t care a damn.

“Sbonga what do you say?” I ask.

“Ummm, okay I will go,” she says.

“Without getting approval from the elders?”

“Ya,” she continues mopping.

I have a bad feeling about this. Why can't Bab' Shange minds his own business? What if something goes wrong during that cleansing?

“I will see you later, take care of yourselves.” He walks out.

I'm going to call my uncle before him. I want to know how well he knows Bab' Shange and if he trusts him with this. I could be overreacting, he's a caring family friend.

I leave the broom and go outside to make a call.

“My long lost niece,” he answers.

I laugh, “Hey Mzilikazi, how are you?”

“I can’t complain mshana, it’s all well. I’m just happy to hear from you after a long time. I hear you gave birth. How’s the little one?” he asks.

“He’s okay, just crying nonstop today. I called to ask if you know how cleansing is done if someone lost a baby. Can it be conducted by an outsider?”

“It depends on the type of cleansing. If it’s done at a healer’s place or home. If it’s done at home, then only family members can partake in it. Who lost a baby?”

“Sbonga,” I say.

“Sbonga was pregnant?” The shock in his voice!

“Yes, now Bab’ Shange wants to take her to a healer for cleansing?”

“That’s not his place, he can’t be interfering in such situations, I told him to stay away and let Mhlongo raise...” He stops abruptly.

I look at the screen, he’s still on the line.

“Malume?”

I hear a sigh.

“Mshana let me talk to your mother about this.”

“Okay,” I drop the call.

My head is racing with a lot of thoughts.

There’s something I don’t know and I’m not even sure I want to. My uncle knows

Bab’ Shange and he’s spoken to him about

certain things and asked him to stay away.
Now the question is why, I'm scared of the
answers.

I get back inside the house, Sbonga is done
mopping.

“Were you talking to Nkatha again?”

My eyes widen. Is Nkatha her age-mate
now?

“It's Bhuti to you, and no I wasn't talking to
him,” I say.

“Jeez, I'm sorry,” she raises her hands up.

I pull the chair and sit. I just want to have a
little rest before Khaya wakes up.

But there's no rest for the witch's daughter
in this hood. Someone is screaming my
name outside.

“Salo! Salo!” I recognize that’s my neighbor’s voice.

I head to the door, Sbonga is behind me.

I look down the streets, people are standing at their gates watching my dad and mom fighting in the middle of the road.

“Sbonga, we are leaving.”

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BUSISEKILE KHUMALO

She didn’t find him with a woman. Just a bunch of local drunks who were advising him how to go about filing for divorce. She didn’t slap him there, she should have

though. This man betrayed her, he thought he'd take her out of his life that easily after everything she's done for him. Not to mention that he told Sbonga she's not his daughter. Yes, she's not. But why tell her? Is fatherhood about whose sperm it is or who raised the child? He cheated too, many times. It's not her fault that Thembelihle couldn't conceive.

“Who did you think was going to take my place?” She's pulling him down the road.

“Busisekile let go of me, I will walk home without your hands on me.”

“Why didn't you walk all these days? I'm pulling you because it seems like you've forgotten your way home. See that shop there, it's where I bought you airtime to call

your useless friends.” She turns and points at MaNkosi’s gate. “That’s your brother’s house.”

“I know that, stop this madness, look how people are looking at us.”

“You wanted attention, didn’t you? Let’s go then Majazi, you have everyone’s attention now.”

A taxi stops in front of them and drops MaNkosi. Out of shame, Delani pulls from Busisekile’s grip.

Busisekile stops and looks at him, then at MaNkosi.

“What is in there?” she asks MaNkosi as she a big shopping bag to her head.

“Let’s go MaKhumalo,” says Delani.

“My daughter got a job for Nondu, but now she’s just passing us by and not even greeting.” She sees a box of pizza MaNkosi has in her left hand, Nzuzo asked for it. Busisekile laughs out loud, “Look at her showing off. Do you know how many times I’ve eaten pizza in this life?”

“Not everything is about you MaKhumalo,” – Delani says. He’s just a simp, can’t they gang-up on MaNkosi and fight their own issues in private.

“One Spar shopping bag MaNkosi and you’re already walking like a peacock. This means we will be in hell the day you enter Pick’ nPay doors,” she says.

“How are you MaKhumalo? It’s nice seeing you,” MaNkosi says crossing the road to her gate.

“It’s not nice seeing you. I don’t like people who show off, with your daughter’s few cents you now go to town mid-month and buy...what is that purple bottle there? Beetroot? Do you think eating beetroot will make you look fresh like me?” She’s following MaNkosi and crossing the road too.

“Enough!” Delani yells.

“Shut up Njomane, I want to deal with her.”

The neighbors are standing at their gates watching. Delani rushes and grabs her by arm. He turns her around while she’s still

hurling insults at MaNkosi and slaps her across the face. The neighbors start calling Salo. Busisekile is fighting back, which makes Delani forget that he's fighting with a woman and throws a fist. They're wrestling in the middle of the road.

MaNkosi gets inside the gate and locks it. Then she takes out a can of Coke and opens it and sips. They better not kill each other because she's got so much more for them to be mad about.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 73

SALO MHLONGO

They walk in accompanied by some neighbors. My mother's face is pink, she's bleeding from the nose and looks pretty fucked up. I don't know what kind of people they are. Sbonga is traumatized. As they walk in, angry at each other and smelling blood, I wonder if Khaya is not going to get sick from the negative aura they carry.

“Salo call the police for me, this is gender-based violence and I'm not going to be in the statistics. He will rot in jail,” she's filling a glass of water.

I'm not going to call anyone, I don't even know what they were fighting about. I doubt their violence was based on gender, witchcraft-based-violence maybe.

"Your mother is talking Salo," one of the neighbors say.

They're here to see how everything unfolds so that they can spread detailed gossip. I don't have to entertain this, I leave without saying a word and go to my room. Sbonga is here with Khaya, it's the first time I see her holding him. She still looks disturbed, one thing about her she still sees mom and dad in them.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

She nods. "What about them?"

“Your mom is calling the police, I guess he will be arrested and people will have more to say about us,” I say.

She curses, “They’re ruining my life!”

“Start packing if you don’t want to witness more of this. There’s nothing anyone can do, they were a team in all their sins and now they’ve turned against each other. It’s what you get for doing bad things to innocent people,” I say.

“What if they kill each other?”

“If you are here, can you stop them?”

She sighs.

Exactly! I’m done being caught up in their mess. I once tried, dad refused to separate from her, that time I still had faith in him, I thought he could turn his life around and

repent. But not anymore, they're cut from the same cloth.

We stay in my room until the police arrive. I don't know who helped her call them. I'm still here because I'm waiting for Gatsheni to arrive. I'm not in a condition to drive yet, I have to sit at the back and hold Khaya, I cannot trust Sbonga to do it, she's a social media addict.

There's a knock at our door. It opens, mom walks in.

"Who's going to be my witness?" She's looking at me.

"Not me, I was an audience, not a witness," I say.

“But you can tell them how he’s been abusive towards me throughout the years. Emotionally and financially,” she says.

“I didn’t live with you, so I don’t know,” I say.

“Fine, you can lie,” she’s crazy with a capital C.

I don’t like her husband that much but he’s still my father and he’s never been abusive. If there’s someone who deserves to be arrested it should be her.

“He will be arrested then what?” I ask.

“Then we will move on with our lives. I blame God for taking his brother and leaving him.”

Are we really going to put that on God?

“Sbonga and I are going to Salt Rock, we are just waiting for transport, this really doesn’t concern me,” I say.

“I’m coming with you, I’m not safe here, your father is an animal. You should’ve seen the way he slapped me, I saw stars right in front of my face. See how ruined my face is now!”

I can see it’s ruined but we are not taking her with us. We are trying to run away from her, why would we bring her along?

“Mrs Mhlongo,” there’s an officer at the door.

“We are not done, you have to come with us down to the station,” he says.

“Have you handcuffed him? I’m scared,” she asks.

She's being dramatic as usual, they were walked in by neighbors and dad didn't try to kill her.

"Yes, we did, please come out." This officer really believes he's dealing with normal people here.

"Okay, give me a minute to say goodbye to my children," she says.

We hear the officer's footsteps going away.

She turns to Sbonga, "Take pictures of me and put it on your Facebook things so that this case will trend and reach to Bheki Cele. Justice For Busisekile Khumalo!"

Sbonga starts taking pictures, she's posing and intentionally closing her eyes so that she can look worse than she is. I'm just glad she doesn't have access to social

networks because she would've turned this into a real thing.

“Bye girls,” she says and heads to the door.

She remembers the grandson and comes back to say goodbye to him as well.

“Khehla lagogo, look at you!” She’s picking him up. Damn, I was having so much peace with him sleeping, now he’s going to continue where he left off with his crying.

“Do you remember how thin Nzuzo was when he was 1 month old? Yours looks healthy, you can tell he was planned and conceived in the white neighborhood.” In her head everyone is competing with Nondu and her mother, now there’s even a 2 weeks old Khaya versus Nzuzo.

“I’m sorry I’m not spending enough time with you, khehla lagogo. If it wasn’t for your stupid grandfather I wouldn’t be leaving,” she says putting Khaya down on the bed.

“Bye girls,” she repeats and walks out.

I release a huge sigh and look at Sbonga.

“Delete those pictures, she’s not getting a hashtag,” I say.

“Isn’t she dramatic?” She laughs.

I’m laughing too. I think I’ve been too angry about their behavior, now I don’t care that much.

At least now they will be handled by the police, not me.

I'm just sad my father hasn't seen Khaya, despite all his flaws, he made sure Khaya was safe from my mother. If it wasn't for him I would've lost Khaya early in the pregnancy.

My phone rings, it's Nkatha.

Sbonga is giving me a look, I don't know why she acts like he's always calling me. Yes, we talk a lot now that the baby is here, but doesn't it make sense because Zothani is not here to support me?

"Hello," I answer.

"Has Gatsheni arrived?"

"No, not yet. But don't panic, we are fine, there's no more chaos, we will go when he arrives," I say.

“This means I can’t trust him even when you guys are in danger, let me call him and check when he feels like getting you or I must leave work and do it myself.” He drops the call, he’s not pleased and I’m scared the poor man might lose the poor man because of me.

He calls me again after a short moment and tells me Gatsheni is almost here.

“Are we leaving?” Sbonga asks.

It sounds like she’s on the fence, I don’t know what solution she thinks she can bring by being here.

“Yes, we are leaving Sbonga,” I say.

She exhales heavily and nods.

We are not abandoning home, just choosing peace.

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AT THE POLICE STATION

“So who hit first?” Detective Gcwensa asks.

“I did,” Delani says.

“You hit women?”

“I was trying to protect my brother’s wife,
she was attacking her at her gate.”

Gcwensa shakes his head, this looked like a
circus from the start.

“So I’m going to arrest both of you for
assault,” he says.

Busisekile's eyes widen, she's not a jail material.

"I didn't touch her though, wanting to hit someone is not against the law," she says.

"But you humiliated her and defamed her character, accusing her of things even in the past."

"Then she needs to come here and open the case," she folds her arms and glares at Gcwensa. She's not a lawyer but she knows her rights.

"Fair enough," he turns to Delani. "Follow me, you're under arrest for assaulting a woman, you have the right to remain silent as everything you say may be used against you in a court of law."

“Just lock him up for two weeks so that he can take me seriously and stop licking MaNkosi’s ass,” Busisekile says ecstatically.

“That will be for the judge to decide Mrs Mhlongo,” – Gcwensa.

“Did he hit the judge? I’m telling you to arrest him only for two weeks.”

“Mam, it’s not for you to decide. Allow the law to take its course, you’ve opened the case now everything lies in what the court decides,” Gcwensa says, stupid man.

“How do I reverse this? I don’t want him to be a jailbird, we’ve been through worse than this and he’s not abusive, I just wanted him to get arrested.” She’s on her

feet, her handsome husband is looking at her with so much remorse.

“This is not a playground Mrs Mhlongo, it’s a police station. We wasted our petrol driving to your house, now you’re wasting our time,” Gcwensa says, as if he paid for the petrol out of his own pocket. Isn’t it the ANC that she also gave her prestigious vote to paying for this man?

“I’m withdrawing the case, he’s not guilty, I hit him first,” she says.

“So I’m a clown here? Mhlongo will go home and you will be arrested for wasting state resources.”

“Ahhh, I just came out of a mental institution, why did you believe me?”

Gcwensa frowns, “Is this a joke to you?”

Busisekile looks at her husband, “Njomane tell him.”

“We can prove it,” Delani says.

Gcwensa sighs, “Get out of here, both of you.”

Busisekile smiles and pulls her husband by hand. They walk away free, this was probably MaNkosi’s way of turning them against each other. What were the odds of her being dropped by the taxi at the same time that she was having a public argument with her husband? She obviously provoked her on purpose, she will be disappointed to see them walking together again. For this she’s not even going to punish him for trying to divorce her.

She was able to grab her purse before leaving. They catch a taxi home, she instructs the driver to drop them two stops away. All those witches who were enjoying their fight have to witness their happiness.

“How did we get here?” Delani asks as the taxi drives off.

“Where? We are okay Njomane, we will get through this, we’ve been through much worse.”

“I think you’re looking at this from a delusional point of view MaKhumalo. I killed my own brother and put his family through hell, then we abused our daughter financially because of the sacrifices we made that she never asked for to begin with. And now we’ve destroyed everything

we had, we can't even blame other people. Sbonga getting pregnant was because of how we've been neglecting her as a child. You don't stop being a parent because the child is in boarding school. Really, what have we taught her about life?"

Busisekile sighs, "Njomane stop overthinking. Sbonga is fine."

A moment of silence passes, then Delani clears his throat.

"I know about her," he says.

He can't bring that up after she just rescued him from being jailed.

"I don't want to talk about that now, let's be grateful about surviving today then we will talk about Sbonga," she says.

“Okay, let’s go home and apologize to the children for embarrassing them. I know Salo is more angry at me, I haven’t had the chance to meet my grandson,” he says.

They’ve covered a distance now, the neighbors were at their gate to watch them fight but now they’re indoors not seeing this happily-ever-after. What kind of witchcraft is this?

“Why are they indoors?” she asks.

“But we are not doing this for them. It’s time we focus on how we are moving on from this, together or apart,” he says.

Busisekile pauses and looks at him with her eyebrows snapped. Apart? The only thing that’s going to be apart is his testicles.

“Together Njomane, only death can do us apart,” she says.

He inhales sharply and continues holding her hand as they walk towards their gate.

“Let’s go to MaNkosi and apologize,” she suggests.

“But you’re not sorry, why should we go there? I’m tired.”

“To show her that we are okay in disguise. Come, let’s go.” She pulls his arm, they’re taking another direction, heading to MaNkosi’s gate.

“Someone is watching from the Mcineka gate, let me hold you like this.” She wraps her arm around Delani’s waist. They cross the road, she doesn’t want the person peeping through the gate to disappear

before witnessing the whole happiness.

When she turns her eyes there's a truck coming their way. It's close, too close.

“Njomane....” She lets go of him and runs.

But she's running towards the truck instead of away.

“MaKhumalo no!” He runs after her, trying to save her.

The driver failed to hold the brakes, they were too close...

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 74

SALO MHLONGO

We are at the garage filling up. I don't know what delayed Gatsheni so much because he didn't even fill up the car. I hope he's not entertaining girls with Nkatha's car, being a sugardaddy. Sbonga is inside the shop, not that she really needs something, she just wants to swipe expensive garage snacks and airtime with my card.

My phone rings, I check the caller hoping it's not the police. I'm trying to run away from the drama, and luckily it's MaNkosi.

"Hello Ma," I answer.

"Hey Sally, where are you?"

“At Total garage, I’m visiting with Sbonga.”

Running away actually.

“Can you come back? It’s urgent my child,” she says.

“Yoh!” I wish I can have the guts to say no. I want to get to Zothani’s house and rest. I think I’ve been there only twice after his death. I’m not too scared today because I will be with Sbonga and Khaya.

“Let me talk to your driver,” she says.

She’s really on a mission. I release a sigh and tell her it’s okay, we are going to drive back.

Gatsheni comes back after paying the petrol attendant, Sbonga is still inside the shop and I’m about to make him drive back and forth, aren’t we a piece of work?

“Bab’ Gatsheni can you drive us back home? My aunt just called, she says there’s something urgent that she needs me for,” I say.

“Let me call Mr Zungu and let him know,” he says.

Of course, getting permission from Nkatha.

“I can just text him,” I say.

“Okay, do that and also call your sister.”

He leans back on his seat and unwraps sweets he just took out of his pocket. I quickly text Nkatha and then call Sbonga.

She comes out of the shop right after the call.

“I can’t even take a selfie!” she fusses as she takes a seat.

“Unfortunately no, MaNkosi has asked us to come home urgently, it’s a U-turn,” I tell her.

She sighs dramatically. “What now? I hope we are not needed by the police.”

“Or local newspaper journalist for comments,” I say and answer my phone, Nkatha is calling. He wants to know what is urgent and if his son is still okay.

As we drive past the police station I’m wondering if my parents are still there and if dad is really locked up. He was wrong for hitting her but we all know how far Busisekile can push people’s buttons. I have to be ready with bail money, no rest for a witch’s daughter.

There's a roadblock on the route home, we have to use another one. Maybe there was an accident, local drivers are always drunk and speeding.

Okay, there's a police van here, right outside MaNkosi's gate. I feel cold in my stomach, who got hurt? MaNkosi rushes to us before we even get out of the car.

"Was there an accident here?" Sbonga asks.

There's a truck parked and a crowd gathered by the gate.

"Sally give me the baby," MaNkosi says, she's not answering Sbonga's question.

My legs are trembling, we get closer and I notice that there's a corpse at the side of the road. The person is covered, Solwazi is

surrounded by two police officers, it looks like they're questioning him.

What the hell is going? I look back at MaNkosi, she's passed Khaya to one of the neighbors who's walking away with him. Babies and dead bodies don't mix.

"What happened Ma?" I don't know what to think, she seems fine, but why is Solwazi being questioned and whose truck is this?

"There was an accident my child, your father has been rushed to the clinic, he was badly injured," she says.

Take a deep breath Salo!

"What was he doing here?" I ask.

I thought he was taken to the station by the police.

“He was coming back from the station with your mother,” she says.

I’m numb, but even that is an understatement, I feel dead inside.

That’s what I think until Sbonga asks the question;

“Is that my mom?” She’s pointing at the corpse, fighting her way there.

I pull her back, “No, don’t be crazy.”

MaNkosi gently pulls me back, Sbonga is being comforted by another neighbor.

“Yes, that’s your mother Sally, she didn’t make it,” MaNkosi says.

I’ve wished all kinds of things, even death on her. But this moment proves that I didn’t know what I was talking about, my

whole world comes crushing down. I don't have a mother anymore, none.

I'm crying, unable to even comfort Sbonga.

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NONDUMEZULU

I'm in the tea-room drinking juice, I'm counting hours before going home. I love my job, everyday I'm looking forward to it. But the tension that I've created between myself and Dr Manzini makes today a bit intolerable. I want to go home, even though Nkalipho is not there to take care of my dramatic ass today.

Dr Manzini makes his way in. He's too relaxed about the fact that I'm still angry at him. Too relaxed for my liking. It should affect him that I'm not talking to him.

"How are you managing the anger?" he asks.

I never thought I'd be one of those employees, but I don't like my boss.

"I don't have any anger," I say, my whole face is screaming anger.

"Okay, I will apologize with a goat. White or black?" He's still underestimating my level of anger and how dangerous I can be.

"Don't you have patients?" I ask.

"I do, but my employees act like psychiatry patients as well, so I have to check up on

them before they choke themselves with juice to death,” he says.

I laugh and hate myself for laughing at his dry jokes.

“Seriously, I will be mindful of what I say from now onwards. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable at work and I don’t want your sister shouting at me,” he says.

“Salo doesn’t shout,” I’m laughing, I love the fact that he’s scared of someone I’m related to. Now my life can be easy.

“I just don’t want to stress her out,” he says.

“Well, it’s nice to see you caring about someone’s feelings for once.” My phone rings at the same time as his. What a coincidence!

It's my mother, she's not the one to disturb me at work.

"Hello Ma," I answer a bit alarmed.

Nzuzo is out of school by now and these days his father felt like 'volunteering' to fetch him from school. I don't know if he's kidnapped my son and took him to Mangethe because his grandfather needed him and I've been refusing to let him go.

"Nondu how long before you finish work?" she asks.

"Two and half hours. Is everything okay at home? Where is Nzuzo?" It's probably paranoia, but my instincts already tell me my son is not okay.

“He’s here. Is it possible for you to come home from work? There’s a situation that needs you,” she says.

More reasons for me to panic.

“I can take taxis or call Nkalipho to fetch me. Can I talk to Nzuzo?” I ask.

“Okay,” she says and talks to someone at the side. It doesn’t sound like it’s just her and Nzuzo home. I can hear someone crying far from the background. Now I’m scared.

“Mommy,” the little voice says.

I can hear the dryness, that’s how my son sounds when he’s been crying.

“What’s wrong baby?” I ask.

“Gogo and Babo came to the truck. Babo was bleeding, gogo didn’t move. I’m scared of the blood, I want to come to you,” he says.

I can just feel the fear in his voice, but unfortunately I can’t put together the story.

“Whose truck did they come to?” I ask.

“My baba’s truck, the police took him,” he says.

Solwazi, damn.

“Okay baby, I’m coming to get you right now, don’t cry okay?” I just want to hear the full story. What has Solwazi made my son witness? I don’t care much about Babo and gogo, who’s Mam’ Busi in this case. I just care about my son’s peace.

My mother takes back the phone.

“MaKhumalo is no more,” she says.

That is...wow.

“Njomane is in the hospital fighting for his life. They were ran over by Nzuzo’s father with a truck, it was an accident, he was not at fault,” she explains.

“Was Nzuzo inside that truck?” I’m ready for prison, I’m going to murder someone.

“Yes, he was bringing him back from school,” she says.

“Why the hell does he fetch a child with a fuckin’ truck from school? He’s 8, he doesn’t know anything about safety. He’s an adult, he should use his brains instead of listening to a child.” I feel like there’s a hot smoking coming out of my nose and ears.

Solwazi is an idiot, Nzuzo loving trucks

doesn't mean he should be fetching from school with a truck everyday.

“He's just trying to make up for the time he's lost. Don't be hard on him, this was an accident and he's also traumatized.” Mom cannot be defending Solwazi's foolish behavior.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“He was taken by the police, I think they just want to question him,” she says.

“I hope they arrest him.” Ummm, no, that would be like serving justice for Mam' Busi's death. Her death should go in vain, however the police should at least kick Solwazi with their hard boots.

I should be celebrating right now but as usual, Solwazi stood in the way of my happiness.

The door opens, Dr Manzini walks in. I forgot about him, he stepped outside to answer his call.

“Hey, I’m going to Mandeni, I don’t know if you’ve heard the news about some of your family members,” he says. His mood has changed, he’s thinking about Salo.

“Yes, I just heard,” I say.

“I can give you a lift, don’t worry about work, it’s a family emergency,” he says.

“I will fetch my bag, thank you very much.”

I leave him standing in the tea-room

looking absent-minded. I understand Salo’s

pain; she lost her boyfriend a few months ago and now her mother.

I feel sorry for her because she doesn't deserve all of this.

I don't know if I should call her or wait until I get home. If her father is fighting for his life it means everything regarding the funeral has become her responsibility.

Sekhona is too young, I don't think my mother will be that involved because Mam' Busi didn't like her publicly. If she was able to come back and say something about her own death she would've found a way to pin the accident on my mother.

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Dr Manzini drops me at my gate and then drives off to Mam' Busi's house. I can't believe I will never see that woman again. I don't know if God is trying to invite me back to church with this. Or should I pay half of my salary towards the tithe? I don't know, God give me a sign, how do I reward you for this?

I walk in and find Nkalipho on the couch with Nzuzo lying on his lap. I didn't expect this, my mother is not home, she's probably with Salo and Sbonga. It was thoughtful of her to call Nkalipho, because it took me two hours to get here after her call and she had to be with Salo, she couldn't take the traumatized child with her.

"Is he asleep?" I'm whispering.

He looks at Nzuzo and then nods. My baby doesn't sleep at this time, what he saw really scared him.

“Thank you,” I hug him on the shoulders, he gives me a kiss.

I take my bag to my room and then come back to take Nzuzo to bed.

He refuses, “Let him sleep here.”

I nod and ask if I should bring him anything. It looks like he's determined to be Nzuzo's bed until he wakes up. He asks for icy water, I go and make him a sandwich. The fridge is full, I guess Solwazi did this because I know my mother didn't. I think he's stepping up a bit, he just needed me to go crazy before taking his responsibilities. But the truck saga, we are

still going to talk about it and he's going to take my child to therapy until he recovers from this. That's not even up for negotiation, and next time he won't discuss with my mother where the safety of my child is concerned. If he wants to fetch Nzuzo from school he will have to tell me what kind of car he's using. I doubt Nzuzo will ever look at trucks the same though, the obsession ends now.

We are having hushed conversations because we don't want to wake Nzuzo up. My mother called him right after she called me because Nzuzo became uncontrollable. He had to leave work and rush here. It's the blood Nzuzo saw that scared him more

than Mam' Busi not moving. For Salo's sake I hope Babo makes it. It will be too much for her to lose everyone in such a short space of time.

My mother arrives home, she's not alone. The reckless driver is behind her, I guess he paid his way out. I know the police wouldn't have arrested him even if he was guilty, jail is for the poor in South Africa.

He walk in and sits. No drama about Nzuzo being on Nkalipho's lap, he's humble. His eyes are red-rimmed and swollen. I've never seen him in such devastation.

“Why did you fetch a child with a truck?” I ask.

He doesn't lift his face to look at me. "He asked me to, I was just trying to make him happy."

"You wouldn't have a hard time figuring how to make him happy had you been there the last 8 years. So if he asks you to fetch him with a boat you're going to create a river to his school and fetch him with it?"

My mother exhales loudly and gives me an eye.

"This is not the time," she says.

My mother is always nice to people who don't deserve it.

"Ma, he's 8. How does an adult listen to everything an 8 year old says? He's a child, he thinks Father Christmas is real, he has

unrealistic wishes...” Nzuzo wakes up and grabs Nkalipho by his jacket.

He doesn't even know where he is, he's just crying.

“Gogo is coming to the truck!” he's pointing at the wall and hiding his face on Nkalipho's chest.

I take him from Nkalipho, he sees my face and calms down. This is bad, I underestimated how affected he might be. Everyone is quiet, watching me rub his back, he's snuggled himself on my chest.

Solwazi stands and walks out.

“I will go and check up on him,” Nkalipho. He's looking at me, waiting for a reaction before standing up. It's his brother regardless of everything that has happened.

“You can go,” I say.

He stands and walks after Solwazi.

“Nondu, you have to be sympathetic. It was an accident, he’s also traumatized and feels bad about killing someone’s mother, he doesn’t know what’s going to happen to Njomane either, the kids are crying his name at home, and now Nzuzo is like this. It’s too much for one person, rather just keep quiet,” my mother preaches.

Okay, I’m the heartless one, I should keep quiet.

Nkalipho comes back with him. One ray of sunshine amidst all of this is that they’re comforting each other, no punches are thrown. For once they’re sitting together, Nkalipho’s arm on his shoulder, he’s not

throwing a tantrum. Mnguni's wishes might come true, there's hope for brotherhood.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 75

SALO MHLONGO

She was six months behind with the insurance payments. I was told paying what is owed won't immediately release the payouts. I knocked at every door but at the end I had to accept that I will be

burying my mother from my own pocket. I don't know what I would've done if my uncle wasn't here, he's taken over my father's role and doing everything necessary for the funeral arrangements.

I'm still breathing, so I can say I'm alive.

But everything inside me is dead, I know no pain greater than this. Yes, losing Zothani hurt me, but this one is different, I have to look at my little brother and sister in the eye, see their emptiness and be unable to do anything. I'm not their mother, regardless of the major role I've played in their upbringing. If anything happens to dad the thing called 'home' ends for them.

Tomorrow is the funeral, the candles are lit but nobody is sitting on the mattress.

MaNkosi comes and goes, I understand she can't do much because of the issues that existed between her and my mother. She's supportive where she can, especially with Khaya. My uncle is fetching the body with Sekhona and mkhulu. The tent people are here, Sbonga's friends have arrived, they're very helpful I must compliment.

I get a call from Sekhona. He's too young for what he's doing, God heal him.

"Hey Sekho," I answer.

"Sisi there's a problem here with the coffin," he says.

I thought everything was finally sorted out.

"What is it?" It's bad news, I know.

"We need a new one, this one fell before they loaded it into the hearse."

“What? How were they holding it?” I’m scared of what he must’ve seen. I don’t know if it fell and the body rolled out and he had to see his mother dead like that.

“Malume tripped and fell,” he says.

That man went there clearly drunk.

“So what now, I’m paying for two coffins?”

“Yes,” he says.

All the money that the Zungus invested into Khaya’s future will go into this funeral.

“Give the person assisting you there the phone,” I say.

I just want tomorrow to come, then we can focus on healing than the funeral. I’ve only visited my dad once, he was unconscious, he doesn’t know what’s happening here. I

don't know if he's going to make it, he's in a public hospital against Nkatha's wishes. I don't want to be indebted to him, I know he's doing everything out of the goodness of his heart, but kindness always need to be paid back along the way.

I sort the coffin thing out and inform everyone that there's a bit of a delay. I take Khaya from Sbonga's friend and go to my bedroom. I just need to bond with my baby for a bit, I haven't had time to myself with everyone around giving me orders.

He's my source of strength, I'm just lying next to him and looking at him. A Zothani is slowly coming out as he grows up. He's growing into Zothani's features and getting

dark-skinned, I had hope when he was born, he looked pinkish and I thought he'd take after my mother's complexion. But nope, he's his father's son and I'm wondering how happy Zothani would have been to see all of this. Maybe Khaya will have love for sports as well, that would be great.

There's a knock, again. I can't even have a little break.

"Sisi, the goat has ran away," that's Sbonga at the door.

"What?" I leave the baby on the bed and go to the door.

She opens, she's panting and sweating.

"I don't know how it broke the rope, I was going to MaNkosi to fetch the trays and it

just ran out of the gate while it was open and ran across the street,” she says.

“Is anyone running after it?” I ask.

“Yes, they’re running after it,” she says.

I nod, that’s the only reaction I can give. I have a feeling that everything is about to go wrong. It’s one problem after another, I feel like God is indirectly punishing me for my parents’ sins because in all that is happening they’re not suffering, I am.

The boys who were chasing the goat come back empty-handed.

“What are we going to do?” That’s my uncle’s new girlfriend staring at me and demanding answers. She’s not married, I doubt they’ve dated for more than 3 months, and knowing my uncle it won’t last

even a year. But she's here and I have to call her my aunt. It's essential for a goat to be slaughtered for cleansing purposes after the burial, obviously I have to make a plan.

"Can't we call the police and report it missing? Maybe they will go and search for it," Sbonga.

"They won't," I tell her. The police hardly go and look for missing people, what makes her think they will care for a goat?

"This means something, not so long ago it was the coffin..." Yeah, nosy neighbors are here as well.

"I will buy another goat," I cut her before she turns into a sangoma.

I don't care if this is not a coincidence and it's happening for a reason. I'm not looking

for answers, I will keep replacing until she's buried.

“Sbonga you will go, ask Bab’ Shange to accompany you with his van, he said he’s here to help us with whatever we need,” I say that and go back to my room.

At this point I don’t care about the money anymore, I just want everything to be over. All that is happening feeds into the gossips that are already making rounds about us. I don’t care about me, but I care about my siblings because they’re teenagers and things like this affect them.

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I didn't see things coming together at all. But she finally got home, there were hiccups along the way with the hearse and flat tyre, I was starting to lose hope. I didn't view the body, I'm still getting a lot of backlash about it. They're claiming her soul won't rest if she doesn't see me. Judging by the way Sbonga was crying, I don't think I can handle looking at her dead body. Unlike with Zothani's, I don't think it will give me any closure or peace.

Bab' Shange walks in, he's devastated.

"Where's Sbonga?" He looks around the room.

Sbonga is curled up on a pile of blankets, still shedding tears.

"Can I take her out for fresh air?" he asks.

“No, they can’t go outside the gate unless if it’s necessary, they’re mourning,” my new aunt says. Very opinionated, isn’t she?

Bab’ Shange looks at me.

I shrug, I don’t have much of a say.

He walks out disappointed. My suspicions of him are getting stronger by the day. I’m even picking up things that don’t exist, like the familiarity of his ears.

“What time does a vigil starts?” someone asks.

“It’s still early, I think 10pm,” MaNkosi says.

I doubt anyone is going to come, it might be just family alone.

Nondu finally arrives, Nzuzo is not with her, so the first question she gets is where is Nzuzo.

“Mnguni asked that he visits,” she says.

I guess the relationship has evolved to grandson and grandfather.

“How are you?” she hugs me.

“I’m okay,” I say.

She sits next to me.

We haven’t talked. I haven’t talked to Solwazi either, I don’t know how many times he’s come here. Do I hate him? No. But it will take time for me to get into any kind of talk with him. .

“Is Nzuzo coping?” I ask.

She exhales heavily. “He’s slowly forgetting, his father has been bribing him with all kinds of toys and taking him to therapy. He’s also attending it.”

“I hope he heals too,” I say, bitterly.

“You don’t have to be a good guy. Hate him if you have to, she was your mom at the end of the day,” she says.

“I don’t hate him, I just don’t know how I feel. It’s a lot to deal with, especially after everything I’ve been through, and now everything keeps going wrong like I’m the one being punished.” She grabs my hand, I’m not going to cry, I’ve done a lot of that the last couple of days, I just want everything to be over so that I can be alone with my siblings.

My new aunt walks past with a mountain of rice and 2L Coke, I'm sure she's opened the other six pack that was going to be given to people tomorrow.

"Salo, there are women who just arrived, they need tea," MaJobe says, she's from six streets away and going in and out of every room like she's family.

People have started arriving and they have to be taken care of.

Nondu rolls her eyes when she walks out.

"Really? Are you mourning or hosting? Don't go, they should've left their homes after they've drank tea," she says.

"I'm not going, they will gossip about me whether I feed them or not," I say.

**I will never understand the culture of
hosting while you're in pain, people are
insane.**

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**Singing and praying all night. I'm
exhausted, I want to go to bed.**

**I don't know where Sbonga found all the
good things she's saying about our mother.
I'm sitting far from the coffin, I must've
sensed something because all of a sudden
people start moving away.**

**"There's blood," someone says loud
enough for the whole room to hear.**

People are up on their feet, some walking out.

I'm just freaked out. My uncle rushes over to check, he's opening the coffin and I can smell the blood. He shifts isihengqo over and asks that someone comes with a dish of water and a cloth.

"She's bleeding," he says.

I don't think it's normal, more people are walking out.

I feel someone grabbing my shoulders in an aggressive hug from behind.

It's Sbonga, she's quivering behind me.

"Go and check on Khaya and Nondu," I slowly push her off. I don't want her to witness whatever this is, she's already shaking in her boots.

She walks out, my aunt walks in followed by Sekhona.

Now it's just me and few trusted gossips who want to see the end.

"Please excuse us," my uncle says to them.

They're not happy, but they've been dismissed.

He looks at me standing by the wall.

"You can go too," he says.

"Why is she bleeding?" I want to know.

"It's wounds from the accident," he says.

"But there's blood from her nose and ears as well. This is a sign of something bad, look at this!" that's his girlfriend. I'm not sure if she's exaggerating or telling the truth.

She receives a mean stare from my uncle.

I walk out, my head feels heavy. I'm scared to even be inside the yard, I wish I can run away. People are standing in the kitchen, they shush it as soon as I walk in.

I bump into Nondu from the door of my bedroom. She didn't want to attend so she offered to babysit throughout the night.

"What's happening?" she asks.

"I don't know," I push my way in.

She's following me. Sbonga is curled up here as well.

It gets chaotic, people are running around outside, it feels like I'm in the middle of a movie. After a long while my uncle calls us back saying everything has been sorted. I have questions, a lot of them.

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Serving breakfast and giving bathwater is one of the exhausting duties. Even the neighbors are here waiting for room service and they're full of demands. I'm a host, what can I say? Everyone is getting ready for the service, we are going to be singing and praying again. No more scandals now, I pray to Father Jesus.

Sbonga being her mother's daughter is rocking a black dress with ruffles and a floppy hat with a big ribbon. I don't know who she thinks is going to run errands if she's in those high heels.

"I want to take pictures with her," she says.

Expect people to drop bombs around here.

“She’s dead,” I remind her, in case she’s forgotten.

“Just her coffin, I want to capture the last memories,” she says.

“Okay, talk to malume.” Another hot topic for the streets- her daughter was taking pictures with the coffin. At this point I feel like we are feeding the gossips and that’s not their fault.

Nondu walks in, followed by Nokwanda.

“Your daughter is here,” she says.

Nokwanda comes and hugs me. I will excuse her dress code, she probably came from her flat and wasn’t advised how to dress up for a funeral. Her thighs are all out, the printed skirt is just below her butt,

she's wearing white runners and skinny top.

"My mom is here," she says.

"Your mom?" I'm shocked.

I've never heard much about her, she's not that involved in anything, she didn't even come for Zothani's funeral.

"They're in the tent, her and baba and Nkatha," she says.

Nx, this child! She's talking about her father's mother, everything about her is confusing, results of young people having babies. I didn't think Mam' Zungu would come, she's sick and fragile, I would've preferred if she stayed home.

"Nondu please look after them," I say to Nondu.

I don't know how she's going to split herself into two halves. She's babysitting, that's been her job since she arrived, and now I need her to make sure the Zungus are okay.

I slide into my old floral dress and tie a doek around my head. My new aunt is the kitchen director, at least I don't have to worry about that unless they need me to cough money for more ingredients.

The service starts around 10:30am, there's our local pastor, Mfu. Dlamini. The coffin is not here, I guess because of the blood that keeps coming out. I don't think the service will take that long, she has to be buried fast, before the right time. I'm trying not to

overthink this, I'm focusing on the service and seeing her off.

People are singing, they still have the energy.

The pastor disrupts the song with heavy groans. He's a Zion pastor, I sense something coming.

He starts praying out of nowhere, my mother's picture at the front falls down, the frame breaks.

Another klusterfuk.

Instead of feeding into the curiosity, the pastor excuses himself and walks out of the tent. Someone has to start another song

My uncle enters the tent and looks around, when his eyes land on me he walks over. I

don't even hold my breath anymore, I embrace myself for whatever is coming.

“Come with me,” he says.

I follow him out, behind us are hundred pairs of eyes. I find MaNkosi, Mkhulu Mhlongo and his wife next to him, she's blind and unable to do a lot of things, mkhulu is old as well and has hearing problems. Oh, and the pastor is with them. Something is up.

“There's something that the pastor just brought forward. I think you've seen all the strange things that have been happening, your mother's spirit is not at rest,” my uncle says.

“Okay,” – me.

“There are things she should’ve done before leaving this world. You know this isn’t just your father’s house, he’s guarding his forefathers’ property. MaNkosi is the eldest wife in this family, insulting her is like insulting the grandmothers of the Mhlongos. That’s something she should’ve apologized for, now you have to do it on her behalf because...” I don’t hear the rest of it.

After everything I’ve done, now I have to apologize for the things I didn’t do.

“Are you serious?” I thought I was done crying until now.

“She needs to unite with the rest of the family in the other world, your father is not

here to do it for her, and Sekhona is still too young for such rituals,” he says.

“I’m young too, I’m only 28 years old and I haven’t wronged anyone. Why am I bearing the cross for the sins of others?”

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 76

AUNT TEEKAY

Sometimes it feels like a dream, she waits for someone to wake her up and take her back to the reality she was used to. This life of being loved, respected and treated like a whole queen is foreign to her. She just woke up from a nap and there's someone humming and cooking in the kitchen. Well, not really cooking but making her a peanut butter sandwich and a cup of Rooibos tea. He knows her medicine, she's been feeling down a lot this week. She shouldn't be feeling guilty about what happened to the Mhlongos, she was neither the cause of their problems nor accident. But sometimes she regrets getting in that triangle. She wasted years of her life being a sidechick because she didn't believe someone like Khulekani existed. She didn't know her

worth, she thought all there was to her was getting sexual pleasure from men and letting them build their lives with the ones they really love.

“Breakfast is served,” that’s Khulekani walking in.

She smiles, “Breakfast at 12? That’s lunch.”

“Bread is breakfast, anytime of the day.”

He sits next to her.

Thembelihle takes the cup of tea and sips.

He got the sugar right, she smiles and takes a second sip.

“Have you told your family about us relocating?” This is the subject she’s been trying to avoid. She’s still in the dark about the kind of job Khulekani does, Joburg is not a safe place to just move into. They’re

not prepared yet, he's not doing legal stuff by the look of it, he might step on the wrong toes and get arrested in Joburg. Or even worse, die.

"I said I'm still thinking about it," she says.

"But I need to start planning, the earlier you confirm the better," he's persistent with this.

"I will talk to my sister, maybe tomorrow, she's busy with the funeral chaos," she says.

He doesn't say anything, he can see the doubt she has about this move. They haven't dated that long he understands, but this is for the better. Starting over in a new place would do them good.

“Have you been in contact with your family?” she asks.

There’s a change of the atmosphere. He doesn’t like talking about his family.

“Yes, my mother,” he says, clearing his throat.

“And?” She raises her eyes to him.

“Nothing much, we were just catching up. There’s something that I actually want us to talk about.” He’s changing the subject like he always does when the family subject is concerned.

“We talked about having kids,” he says.

Her appetite dies, she feels a knot sitting down in her stomach. Is he changing his mind and realizing that he can’t be a

complete man without anyone to carry his name?

“I want to ask if you can be open to the idea of conceiving through traditional help? I know you may have tried, I just want to give it a shot as well. I know many people don’t like taking that route because of the myths around children born that way. I’m not saying you should...”

“You want kids Khulekani?” she asks, cutting him short.

“I want you to be content with us and everything that we’ve given each other in this life,” he says.

“But I am content with everything,” she says.

“Sometimes you’re down, sometimes you’re vibrant. Sometimes you feel like I’m doing you a favor by being here, and that’s not how I want us to always be. I want you to be a mother if that’s what going to make you happy. I’m open to anything, even getting an orphan via social workers.”

Really now? This is a serious moment but she’s laughing.

“It’s adoption, not getting an orphan via social workers,” she says.

He nods, “Fine, adoption, I’m open to it if you want it.”

“Do you think I can be a good mother though?” She’s doubtful. It’s an experience she’s always been curious about, but now

that he's giving her all these options it's scary.

"You can be good at anything, if not you will learn to be along the way," he says.

"Let us be okay first, emotionally and mostly financially. I don't think social workers would let people with no stable jobs adopt," she says.

"So you'd want to adopt if I get a stable income?" He's saying income, not job. He wants to explore more sources of illegal income.

"Legal income, Khulekani," she says.

"I'm not doing anything illegal, I told you this."

"Then what's hard about telling me what is it?"

“Because you will freak out and get dramatic?”

She frowns, “Me and dramatic?”

Asks the drama itself!

“It involves sex sellers,” he says.

She drops the cup, there’s a huge frown on her face. Prostitutes? That’s what he works with?

“Prostitutes?” she asks.

“Women who exchange sex for cash, I deal with clients and protect them if they require protection,” he says.

“Then get paid with sex?” She’s fuming. It would’ve been better if he robs banks than this.

“I get paid in cash, I don’t engage in casual sex unless if I’m willing to pursue something with the person. They’re not owned by me, they’re all of legal age and I don’t hurt anyone unless the client tries to get funny with one of them,” he says.

She just doesn’t understand. That’s all he does?

“Are they trafficked?” she asks.

“It’s business for them, they have free lives. I knew you’d react like this, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you,” he says.

“So you will stop doing that if we move to Joburg?” she asks.

He looks at her, smiles and says yes.

He’s bloody lying.

“What about the loads of cash you came home with the other day?”

“It was from a careless client,” he says.

“You’re lying Khulekani. You robbed a client after your friends sold sex to him?”

“I blackmailed him, he’s a wealthy married businessman, I planted cameras in the room and then asked for money in exchange of my silence,” he says. Now this is the truth she wanted, not that innocent bodyguard he’s been describing.

“So you have a wealthy enemy now? That’s what you are saying,” she asks.

“He’s moved on, and by the way it’s not an everyday code of conduct,” he justifies himself.

“Are you going to stop? This is not the kind of life I want to live and I definitely don’t want to live with a thug,” she says.

Her words hurt him because he’s doing all this for her.

“We need the money,” he says.

“I’d rather stay poor Khulekani, as long as I’m leading an honest life.”

“Okay, I will stop, I just need to at least afford a taxi,” he says.

She heaves a sigh and nods. The tea is cold now, she wants to lie down and process all this.

“I love you, don’t ever think I don’t. You’re always at the back of my mind and I will never betray your trust or make you uncomfortable,” he says.

“I hear you,” she says.

“You are still angry, I understand. Should I make you another cup?”

“No, but if you don’t have a prostitute to go and protect, you can just cuddle me since it’s cold.” This is the dramatic side he was scared of.

He takes the cup of cold tea and plate away. Then he comes back to cuddle her, there’s no prostitute to go and protect.

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NONDUMEZULU

The funeral was paused. Yeap, paused. Strange things keep happening. Sekhona just came back from town with a white goat, another one. Salo is now wearing an apron, they're crossing the street with my mother and Mkhulu Mhlongo with his walking stick. There's a ritual that needs to be done for things to go forward.

“What is going on?” the aggressive voice comes behind me.

I turn, it's Dr Manzini.

“It's family apologies thing,” I say.

“Why is Khaya's mom being taken?” He's asking as if they're taking Salo by force.

“It concerns her mother, so she's standing in for her and apologizing on her behalf,” I say.

“Are you crazy? That’s bullshit. Has she not gone through enough already?” Err, he’s shouting at me right now and I’m not the one making rules.

“She’s barely one month into motherhood and dealing with two losses. Cut her some slack, why didn’t anyone ask for that apology while her mother was still alive? Is it because she’s kind and vulnerable?” He’s still biting my newly-styled head off.

“I’m not involved in any of that,” I say and walk away before he rips my head off.

I understand the situation, Salo doesn’t deserve any of it, but it’s not something I can involve myself in. I’m just a child at the Mhlongos, I don’t have much of a say. I’m Khaya’s nanny for the day, I go back to the

bedroom with warm water, what I enjoy the most is sitting and doing nothing while everyone is running around. But what I don't like is Khaya's unnecessary crying. I was just a teenager when Nzuzo was born, my mother did the most of parenting while I was at school.

“Nonduuuu!” I don't know who that is.

I'm busy, watching a sleeping baby.

“Come in,” I say.

It's Malum' Khumalo's girlfriend, she's in charge of this funeral. I don't think she would've made a cut to be Mam' Busi's favourite sister-in-law if she was alive.

She's slim from her waist-down and very big from the tummy upwards. She's tall,

looks aggressive, with home-made light skin.

“Come, you have to take drinks to the tent,” she says.

“I’m looking after the baby,” I say.

I don’t even think Mam’ Busi would’ve showed up if this was my funeral.

“Bring the baby to the kitchen, we will look after him, you have to work like other girls. I understand you work with doctors, but this is a family funeral,” she says and walks out.

I don’t know if she’s the new Mam’ Busi but with me, I count how many times people provoke me. I will let that comment slide but she needs to watch her mouth because we don’t even know each other.

She demotes me from my nanny position, I was serving the pastor table drinks and then next thing I knew I was being sent around by everyone in the yard. I'm trying to avoid Dr Manzini by all means. I caught a glimpse of him in the tent, he still looked mad. I don't want to be caught in the crossfire.

They've come back, they're below the yard now doing some things. I can just imagine how tired Salo is. My phone rings, I check and it's Masentle. She wanted to come to the funeral thinking it's an important person who died in my family and I said no, it's just Mam' Busi's funeral. My relationship with Nkalipho may be open to

our families but we haven't reached that stage. The Zungus are here because Salo has a baby, it's different from my case even though Solwazi is a Mnguni by blood.

“Nondu how are things going? Is the funeral over?” she asks.

“No, not yet. But we are about to go to the cemetery. Is Nzuzo troubling you?”

“No, he's with Sphiwe playing. You're going to come here to fetch him, right?”

“Ummm no, I can't leave, Nkalipho will bring him,” I say.

“I thought I'd see you, but some other day then,” she says.

What have I done? It sounds serious.

“Or we can arrange lunch,” she says.

“Let me know when, I will be there,” I say.

“Okay, let me not keep you, we will talk.”

She ends the call.

**I wonder what’s up, I don’t like it when
people request to see me out of nowhere.**

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**We are at the cemetery, I’m standing at the
front, I want to see the coffin going down.**

**The pastor is wasting his time reading Bible
verses. There’s noway Mam’ Busi is going
to heaven with that dark heart. Sbonga is
crying again. I’m here to say goodbye to a
witch and she’s saying goodbye to her
mother. Sekhona looks stronger than his
sisters, he’s standing on the opposite side**

of the grave with his arms folded. He's been doing everything, some things I don't even think someone of his age is allowed to do. Dr Manzini is standing with other men, I think as the Mhlongos we've made ourselves an enemy without realizing it. He's looking at everyone with so much despise. Salo is shedding tears, that surely fuels his anger more.

Then out of nowhere there's a sharp scream from the audience. I hope that's not Aunt Teekay with a side-chick tendency coming to bury her ex. Everyone's attention is diverted to where the scream is coming from.

"He's not breathing," the person says.

There's a commotion, someone must've fainted and that dramatic woman, whoever she is, decided to cry for all her heartbreaks in bulk with the scene. Someone is calling Mam' Shange, that's Mam' Busi's bestie, it's her husband who has fainted. Was he that close with his friend's wife?

I've never been this mad at someone for fainting, I feel like he's delaying the coffin going down show. I want to see the soil being piled up on top of her coffin, that way I will know she's never coming back.

People pour water on his face, he wakes up after a few minutes.

"Busisekile come back," he's crying.

I think he's still dizzy and just talking gibberish.

“Sengizomuncwa ubani? Who’s going to suck me now?” Hhayi-bo this man, he’s still out of it, because never. His wife looks confused, she doesn’t know how to shut him up. People have forgotten about the pastor and coffin, they’re more interested in what Shange is crying for.

“Baba you’re at the funeral,” his wife says, she’s patting his face trying to bring him back to reality.

“Come back Mntungwa, please.” His wife is holding his arm, he’s staggering towards the front, where the coffin is. I’m starting to think he’s very much aware of what he’s crying for.

“Please don’t let them bury you, I need one more time with you, hot pie,” he begs.

Now it's clear, his relationship with Mam' Busi was more than what everyone knew. Until today, I never thought women could kick like John Cena. Mam' Shange throws two feet and then drags him away. I understand the frustration and embarrassment she's feeling right now. I don't think this community has ever experienced something shocking like this. Jaws are on the ground.

God bless the pastor for starting the song, it was tense. I'm scared to even look at Salo's direction, I know no child who's suffered like her because of parents' doings. So Mam' Busi wasn't only riding baboons and feeding tikoloshes at night, she was opening her legs, or should I say hot pie, for married men who are her husband's

friends. I'd rather be a fish-eating girl who chased boys and fell pregnant before her pubic hair even grew. Those were her words, apparently I started sleeping with boys before I even grew pubic hair because of my mother's bad parenting. My God doesn't respond on the time I want him to, but when he finally does he shows off.

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I walk in the kitchen and all of a sudden everyone goes quiet. They were definitely talking about what happened at the cemetery. It's what everyone is going to talk about for the rest of the week, top headlines. I take a plate of food that has

been dished and add more stew and coleslaw. There's no way I'm going to starve myself, I will eat and go home to fish and baked beans with a full stomach. It's not everyday that someone like me has access to meat. I pour half a glass of Lemon Twist and drink all of it. I was just tasting, then I pour a full one for drinking.

I grab two chairs, I use one as a table and sit on one. Then I indulge, I'm not satisfied with one plate. As much as the deceased wouldn't have approved of this, I take a second plate. I'm poor, her spirit needs to understand.

Nokwanda walks in with empty plates.

“Are you all good?” I ask.

Salo said I must make sure they're well taken care of.

"Nkatha wants tap water," she says.

Everyone is drinking bottled water, I don't know why he wants tap water. I put my plate aside and get a clean glass. I fill it with water and turn, Nokwanda is no longer here.

"Where did she go?" I ask.

"The one dressed as a prostitute? She went to charge her phone," that's Salo's home-made light-skinned aunt. I don't think she knows how to control her tongue, hell will break loose if Dr Manzini hears the word prostitute next to his daughter's. She'd lose all this complexion and go to refractory settings.

I didn't want to see Dr Manzini but I have to take this water to him. He's standing outside the tent talking to someone over the phone. At least he won't have time to shout at me for what my family is doing to Salo.

Shucks, he drops the phone when I get closer.

I give him the water and keep a hard face.

"You're okay?" he asks.

"Yes," I say with an eye roll.

He exhales heavily, "I'm sorry about lashing out earlier. You didn't deserve that, I know you have no control over anything that happened. I get frustrated when I can't help someone I care about."

I didn't expect an apology, I didn't know he can apologize without Salo telling him to.

"Is she okay?" he asks.

"She just came back, she's seeing Khaya, we haven't talked," I say.

He nods and heaves another sigh. He's stressed.

"She's a strong girl, she will be okay," I tell him.

"When, Nondu? It's one thing after another and I don't even know how to help her ease the pain. I became a doctor because I wanted to help people, yet I can't help one person I should be protecting. How many times has she cried? Zothani is disappointed in me where he is."

“You can’t protect people from death, it’s part of life. Just be there for Khaya, play a father role and let the Mhlongo issues solve themselves,” I advise him.

He nods, but I don’t think that’s enough for him, he wishes to be a superman who solves all Salo’s problems. Unfortunately, her problems are beyond him.

I return to the house, someone has eaten my food. I want to go crazy but I don’t want to be that girl who fought over a plate of food at the funeral.

THE RING FIRE

CHAPTER 77

SEASON FINALE

NONDUMEZULU

When he asked for my support I promised to be there all the step of the way. Now I regret it, I'm not feeling the company I have here, I feel misplaced. Maybe because I'm not married, I have no business being here and performing all these duties. But if I go then everything will go wrong. Mbali only came this morning, she was dropped by a white Polo drunk beyond self-recognition. Nosi's only focus is asking for everything that comes out of the shopping bags for her youngest child. Almost

everything, she wants her son to be given. I don't know what size she wants this boy to be, he already looks like a little rank manager. His mother doesn't lift a finger when it comes to helping around.

That Mapeh aunt everyone has been talking about came with a suitcase, asked for a bed and she's been sitting there since yesterday and asking to be served.

Nobody is helping, maybe they're punishing Nkalipho for turning his back on them. This is his ceremony despite the fact that it's them who asked him to do it, they're not willing to do anything to help him. If I drop him now, I know he will be stranded. That's the only reason why I'm still here, I want today to be successful for

him. Mnguni is on his way, he will be seeing the aunts for the first time in over a decade. Masentle apologized and said she won't make it. I wouldn't have come too, these people have anger against Mnguni and Nkalipho, imagine how they'd treat her.

I'm washing a pile of dishes. I should've asked him to buy a dishwasher because this is slavery.

He walks in with a plate of flame-grilled steak. He's dirty, he's been in the kraal for hours. Yesterday he slept around 1am after they slaughtered the cow, at least there are local uncles helping him in that department.

“Sit down and eat,” he says, putting the plate on the table.

“In a minute,” I say.

I still have to cook dinner, I will use a small pot and only dish for him and the kids.

Adults will sort themselves or eat meat for dinner, I’m nobody’s slave.

I don’t know this girl who walks in, she came with Mapeh. She doesn’t look sober, she goes straight to the plate on the table and grabs the meat with her dirty hands without even asking.

“That’s for Nondu,” Nkalipho says a bit too late, she’s touched everything and I’m no longer going to eat that meat.

“Who’s Nondu?” She’s clearly drunk, they all know me, I’ve been their servant since last night.

Nkalipho doesn’t answer, he looks annoyed.

“Mmm this is nice. But we need more alcohol,” she’s grabbing the whole plate and walking away.

This is the kind of behavior I’ve been subjected into since last night. These people wants to eat, drink alcohol and gossip. I’m glad Nkalipho is a Mnguni, it would’ve been difficult for me to coexist with these people, he’s better far away from them.

“I will make another one,” he says.

I keep washing dishes, I'm aggressive with the plate in my hand and not talking.

He touches my shoulder, "I'm sorry."

"I'm fine," I say and dump the plate on top of the others and take another one. Almost 30 plates, I'm washing them all alone but he has girl cousins. My mom would faint seeing me do all this, she thought I was invited to be a guest, not a maid.

"I will do them later, go and rest," he says.

Really, he's got his hands full with the male guests, preparing the meat, serving alcohol and looking over the guests. He might come to bed at 1am again.

"I will book, we will go and sleep in a BnB," he says.

I don't know what gives him the idea that I'm angry at him, not at his lazy aunts and cousins.

“You can't do a ceremony and then not sleep at home. Did you grow up in the burbs?”

He tilts his head back, I laugh and shake my head.

“Don't worry about me, your cousins are annoying though, tomorrow morning I'm leaving.”

“I understand, I appreciate everything you've done, I should send my uncles home with you.”

I give him a look, he smiles and pecks my cheek.

“Okay, when this coming month ends?” he says, raising his eyebrow.

“What’s happening when it ends?” I ask.

“Just to let your family know that I’ve seen and fell in love with this beautiful flower and I’m going to pay lobola,” he says.

He’s serious, that’s what more shocking than the suggestion itself.

“Nkalipho, we agreed to 2 years,” my jaws are on the floor. This is not a conversation to have in the kitchen, during a ceremony, with drunk cousins all around.

“To have a child and get married, sending my uncles is like proposing, there’s a long process to be followed before the wedding,” he says.

Whoooah, wait!

“Are you serious?”

“Baby,” he’s not being playful.

“Couldn’t this be discussed in a romantic place? I’m tired, washing dishes and serving your relatives. I can’t even wrap my head around becoming Mapeh’s nephew’s wife right now,” I say.

He laughs, “Okay, maybe we can talk about it once we get back home.”

Or in two years as we initially agreed. I nod.

“Let me go, I will come back with your meat,” he kisses my cheek and walks out.

Mnguni arrived with drinks, he’s a comps by two friends. There’s a family meeting

later, I think the aunts want to confront him about the past. I will be going to bed early, as soon as the neighbors leave I will go. I'm not even interested in that meat, that's how tired I am.

“Sisi is there any soft food I can give my son?” that's Nosi.

“I don't know,” I say.

She frowns, I wait for her to say something but she doesn't. Good for her!

She opens the fridge, finds piles of red meat and sighs. If it was up to her I'd be offering to cook porridge for her son right now.

“What are we having for dinner?” she asks.

Maybe Nkalipho told them we are married.

“That’s a real question, what are you having?” I say.

“You can make pap, we will eat with meat leftovers,” she says.

What a good suggestion!

“Okay,” I nod.

She closes the fridge and walks away.

I’m cooking rice for the kids and Nkalipho. She will find pap in the beer bottles she’s drinking from.

I hear loud singing. It’s no successful ceremony without local drunks singing and dancing. It sounds like there’s so much fun in the tent, unfortunately I can’t be there.

After cooking and dishing up for the little ones, I dish for Nkalipho and cover his food

and take it with me to the bedroom. He rebuilt the main house and then built one room at the back. It's peaceful there, that's where we slept last night.

I get inside and lock the door. I don't want any kid running in and asking me a thousand questions.

I plug water with a kettle and bath using a basin. I won't even throw out the water, I get in my pyjamas and finally lie peaceful on the bed. I have to call my mother and speak to my son. He's not forgotten about the accident but he's okay now, no more nightmares. It was my first time seeing the caring side of his father. He's been a supportive father throughout the situation, emotionally and financially. Both him and

Samantha actually. She's climbed down from the wife's pedestal. Am I friends with her husband? No, we will never be.

Him and Nkalipho haven't had any silly arguments from that day. They don't call each other but they have each other's numbers. My son might grow up with two fathers, there's hope. It took him to kill to understand that life is unpredictable and short.

Oh wait, so they're both murderers now?
Yoh, surely I have a type.

I'm woken up by cold hands touching me. I don't know what the time is, it's dark in the room, I think he just came to bed. There's still noise coming from the main house.

“Sleep,” he whispers.

“What is the time?” I ask.

“It’s just after 11pm,” he says.

I can hear and feel that he’s cold.

I turn and face him. “You want to cuddle?”

“Yes,” he says and wastes no time before wrapping his arms around me.

He’s breathing warmly against me. He’s been busy the whole week, there hasn’t been time for cuddles or anything beyond. I feel my body reacting to his. But damn, we are both way too tired for any action.

Nevertheless I rub myself against him to get an erection.

“In the morning baby,” he says.

Sex rejection is the hardest.

“Okay,” I try not to sound wounded.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” he says.

Bad news, that’s how people start when they’re about to ruin your life.

“What?” My tone is already carrying a warning. There will be hell to pay.

“I did something, I don’t know if it was wise of me. I’m scared to open the results, I feel like my life now depends on a piece of paper,” he says.

This sounds very deep, I reach to the side lamp and turn it on.

He lies on his back and stares up.

Okay, he’s really scared.

“What did you do?” I ask.

“I took Mnguni’s DNA samples, he doesn’t know, and I went to test,” he says.

“Test what?” I’m confused.

“He hinted that there were rumors that I’m not his son before he left for Durban.

Mnguni has secrets, there’s something he’s not telling me about his relationship with my mother. I feel like he’s protecting me from the truthful reality,” he says.

I’m not sure about this.

“If the paternity test came back negative, then what?” I ask.

“That’s what I’m scared of, because I don’t know what I will do if he’s not my father,” he says.

“Do you have them here? We can check them together.” I’m not sure if it’s me or

my obsession with people's businesses
wanting to find out about this.

“Can we do it in the morning?” he asks.

He's postponing everything to the morning.

“Sex in the morning, opening DNA results
in the morning, what else? We will breathe
in the morning?” I can be unnecessary at
times. This outburst is off, he doesn't hover
over it, he pulls me back into his arms and
pecks my lips.

“You will fall pregnant,” he says,
chuckling..

“No, I won't, I'm on birth control and I use
a condom,” I say.

“I don't use a condom for the morning ass-
job,” he says.

Blowjob, handjob and now assjob? I need sex studies.

“What morning assjob?” I ask.

“When I rub myself against your ass in the mornings,” he says.

“That happens?” Shoot me now.

“Didn’t you shout at me the other day for doing it?”

He can be such a creep. What if I fall pregnant? Outercourse doesn’t guarantee no sperm swimming in. I need to be careful and check if no mistake has happened.

“Let’s sleep,” he says, his eyelids are falling down.

I switch the lamp off and snuggle myself onto him. He’s tired, so am I, let’s just sleep

and see how the morning goes. I'm hoping for the best, I don't want him to be heartbroken, we've come way too far.

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I'm woken up by his loud movements. I check the time, it's 5:44am. I'm not getting off bed at this time. I can already hear the kids crying from the main house.

"You're up?" he asks.

"You're loud, what are you doing there?"

He knows what I want, he comes back to bed with cold hands.

It's the big morning, his whole life could be changed by a piece of paper.

I kiss his cheek and ask, “How was your night?”

“I slept in your arms, it was good,” he says.

“How are the nerves?” I ask.

He sighs heavily and turns to take something from the bedside cabinet. He pulls a brown envelope. It’s time, I’m really nervous for him. I know he woke up and kept busy because of stress. When we arrived he visited his mother’s grave, he’s healed, doing this ceremony for her was a reconciliation, I hope she doesn’t disappoint him beyond the grave.

He reads through the document, his hands are shaking.

“What does it say?” I’m anxious.

“Not excluded as the father,” he says.

I don't know why he's not jumping and celebrating, this is good news.

"Is it 99.9%?" I ask.

He nods, "Yeah."

"Then why the long face?"

"I have less than 50% of his DNA, shouldn't it be half from both parents?"

"Not necessarily, you are likely to have 49%, men usually take 51% of their mother's DNA. That's why mothers love their sons more than their daughters." I'm throwing a joke in, trying to neutralize the mood.

"It's 47.5," he says, he's worried.

"It's still conclusive, that's why the results are positive."

He folds it and puts it away. I really thought he'd be happy, but it looks like the seed of doubt was already planted and watered. He's a Mnguni, that's what should matter.

“Your father loves you Nkalipho, even if the results came back negative it still wouldn't take away the role he's played in your life. Forget about all this, not every parent want to open the skeletons of their past to their children. He's got his own reasons to keep the nature of his life relationship with with your mom to himself. It's time you forgive him for the past and show him love before it's too late. Life is too short to hold grudges.”

He knits his brows, “Hhayi-bo you’re preaching so early in the morning?”

“I’m not preaching, nawe think of how supportive he is. Yesterday he came here knowing very well that he’d be roasted by your aunts, but because you were here he showed up to support the ceremony of the woman who stabbed him, almost killed his son and...”

He sighs, “Okay, I get it. Please don’t mention the stabbing thing, I promised him nobody knows except me, he’s not proud of it.”

Fuck my mouth!

“I will go and play golf with him next weekend,” he says.

Can't he just call the old man and tell him he's loved? How does playing golf with someone show him love?

"I love you," he says.

It's so easy for him to tell me that, but not so much his father.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 78

SALO MHLONGO

I brought Khaya here because I have no other choice. There's one to leave him with at home. Tomorrow I have to wake up early and fetch my dad from the hospital. He escaped death by chance, now it's time to come back and face reality. My leave ends in less than two months, Sbonga and Sekho are in school. It's times like these when I appreciate the decisions I've made regarding those two. When holidays come hopefully I would have a house already purchased. I really don't know what's going to become of my dad. There's a lot waiting for him at home, now everyone in the township is aware that he killed his own brother and bewitched Nondu together with my mother. She's dead now, she's not dealing with the consequences. She had an

easy way out. Unlike my dad who's yet to find out that his best friend was sleeping with his wife and there's a possibility that he fathers Sbonga.

I called Nkatha and asked if he can look after Khaya, he agreed. I don't know if he's going to take a day off tomorrow or leave Khaya with his housekeeper. Taking him to his parents would've been senseless because Mam' Zungu is old and sick, her husband can't take care of a 7 week old baby. It would've been better if they had a daughter, then Khaya would have an aunt to look after him when I'm not able to.

I've been here three times after Zothani's death. His house is fancy, spacious and all

that. But it's still just a house of a bachelor, there's no life. It doesn't help that he's a neat-freak, it's like walking in a house that nobody lives in. Not even a remote on the couch, or sleepers on the floor.

I thought he was alone, I don't know who he's talking with. His housekeeper leads me to the lounge where he's seated in the company of a gorgeous, slim faced woman with five layers of make-up.

“Heeey,” that's long hey is not for me, but for Khaya.

He stands and comes to me and takes Khaya.

Then he says mine, short and simple.

“Hey.”

“Hi, are you ready to babysit?” I ask because he’s got the company of a beautiful woman and he’s wearing a formal white shirt. Khaya cheeses constantly, his shirt will be spoiled. Not to mention him crying for no reason, this woman will run and never look back.

“I was born ready,” he says, placing Khaya against his chest and turning to the woman.

“This is Simi,” he tells me.

Okay that’s all, just Simi.

I’m about to tell Simi who I am, but he’s introduced me first.

“This is Khaya’s mom,” he says.

Simi stands up with a practiced smile and gives me a church hug. She must know who Khaya is because she turns to him on

Nkatha's arms and says hello little Manzini. I sit down and watch them bonding with Khaya, I can see that she loves babies, her and I can get along.

"How old is he again?" She looks at me.

"7 weeks old," I say.

"He's grown, mommy can go out now and see people," she says.

I smile for a second, then I try to process what she's saying. What's her name again?

"He's not grown, people aren't dying, she can see them even next year," – Nkatha.

Her eyes widen, then she chuckles.

"Oh okay," she says and looks at me.

I'm not offended, Nkatha loves controlling people, I know how to deal with him. I let

him think he's in control while I do what I like. I'm not breastfeeding Khaya but he still thinks he can dictate what I do.

"Let's settle in," he says to me.

I stand with Khaya's bag.

"Aunty will walk you out, thanks for popping in," he says to Simi.

Then he turns with Khaya and walks away.

I follow behind him, still shocked that he just left his guest in the hands of the housekeeper. I wait until we are at a safe distance, then I ask.

"Is she Khaya's aunt?"

He turns and frowns. "No, she's Khaya's nothing, just a new friend."

“I walk my new friends out of the house. Do you even like her?” He’s such a disappointment.

“She saw the door when she arrived. And yes, I do like her,” he says.

“She’s beautiful,” I compliment.

He walks through the door, I’ve never been inside his bedroom before. It’s a very Nkatha-like bedroom, very strict-looking, everything placed where it should be, pillows not even an inch off arrangement. Khaya has a cot next to his bed. It’s very boyish. Toys, I don’t know how old he thinks Khaya is.

“When did you buy all this? You even have a baby monitor.” I only told him yesterday that I need to drop Khaya off.

“A week before you gave birth,” he says.

I’m impressed, he’s well prepared.

“You need to change the shirt though. How are you going to work tomorrow?” I ask.

“I will leave him with Aunt Gugu, if that’s okay with you. She’s trained with babies, she has two grandchildren,” he says.

“As long as you trust her, I have no problem,” I say.

“She’s worked with me for three years, she’s a good woman, don’t worry.”

“Okay then, I will teach you how to make his bottle and leave,” I say.

He puts Khaya in his cot and takes off his shirt, leaving only the vest underneath.

He's not fit like Zothani, he has a tummy spread. Still attractive for now, but if he lets it grow he will lose shape soon.

Fuck, why am I analyzing my son's uncle's body? Why am I still standing here, what if he's taking his pants off next?

“Should I come with him?” he asks.

I'm at the door. “No, he's sleeping, right?”

He finds me ready with boiled water. I show him how to open the bottle and measure water into it.

“Eight scoops of formula for this bottle, but I only put six and half because his formula is expensive. Then you shake it like this for

10 seconds to make sure the powder dissolves,” I show him.

“Mmmm,” he says.

“He’s asleep, I would’ve shown you how to hold him when feeding him. Don’t overfeed him, sometimes he cries because of the nappy. But...” He’s leaning his back against the counter, staring at me with his ankles crossed. I hope he’s cramming all of this.

“Don’t change his nappy if he’s only peed a few times, wait until the nappy is full, nappies are expensive. But if he poops change him,” I say.

“Mmmm,” he says.

“Some people bath babies two times a day. But I only do it once a day when I’m lazy,

then I just wipe him with a wet cloth,” I say.

That “mmmm” again. I don’t know if he’s really listening.

“Squeeze his browridge three times a day so that it doesn’t get flat.”

“Squeeze or massage?” he asks.

“Squeeze, use your two fingers.”

Oh, before I forget...

“Don’t use the Avent bottle, it’s for going out. I only use it if I’m going to the clinic,” I say.

He raises his eyebrows, “You go girl! So I bought him a set of bottles for you to use them as accessories? And please add two scoops of formula in that bottle.”

“I’m saving,” I say.

“Save your future, not my son’s necessities.”

Whoah, save my future?

“Waste years of your life, not money,” I clap back.

He laughs and shakes his head, then turns to leave.

“Thanks for the class mam,” he says.

Well, he failed, but I will leave Khaya with him anyway.

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I’ve visited him a few times, he knows how the funeral went and how his

hospitalization put a toll on us. But he doesn't know the depth of pain him and his wife put us through. When I'm home I no longer go out because of whispers. Thank God I have a car, it would've been disastrous to use taxis with the reputation that my family has.

He has a cast on his leg and has to use a walking stick. This is one of many burdens that I have. In less than two months I will have to go back to work, who's going to take care of him?

He makes it to the car, we haven't talked much since we left the ward.

"Do you need anything?" I ask, there's a shop opposite the road.

"No, I just want to go home," he says.

I wait for him to settle in his seat and then drive home.

It's no longer a home, just four walls where they raised us. There's no warmth, no good memories of this place. I carry his bags as we make our way in. I haven't cooked in three days, there are empty take-away containers on the kitchen counter. I haven't done groceries, I have funeral left-overs. They will last us for a month or so.

“Please take them to my bedroom,” he says.

I rearranged the bedroom, I think rearranging the house after someone's death is the first step towards starting over without them. He walks in and looks

around for a moment. Then he heaves a sigh and lowers himself down to bed slowly.

“I will call Mkhulu and tell him you’re home,” I tell him.

“Can you do it tomorrow please? I’d like to rest today,” he says.

I nod and head towards the door. My relationship with him has changed drastically, I don’t think I can ever call him babana again. I don’t know if he will ever have my respect again.

“What were you thinking?” I ask, stopping at the door and looking back at him.

He keeps quiet. I take a step back inside the room.

“How can you allow a stranger to tell to kill your blood brother? She’s gone now, your partner in crime, those who share blood with you no longer trust you. You are all alone now. Nobody to call a brother, or sister-in-law, or niece.” This may not be the right time to say this, but I’ve waited for a month to have this conversation with him. What on earth was he thinking?

“One day I will find love Njomane. Maybe that man will marry me and have his future with me. But should anything go wrong I will always have my brother and sister. That’s what families are for, to always be there for you when the world turns its back on you. How did it benefit you to gain temporary love and lose your family? Because really, who do you have now?”

“Are you turning your back against me?” he asks.

I have to sit, maybe he will understand me better if I’m sitting next to him.

“My leave ends soon, I’m going back to work and I’m definitely relocating to be closer to Khaya’s family and work because I need help with him. Sekhona doesn’t like you, I’m sorry to break it to you like this, but he really doesn’t. Sbonga only calls me when she’s in trouble or when she needs money. Once she’s able to make her own money I doubt she will be rolling with anyone from the township. Who are you going to have in your life? Remarrying is not an option, no woman would want to be

associated with you because of the witchcraft thing.”

He’s silent, these aren’t the things he thought about before destroying his brother’s family and killing him. He thought everything was going to stay in the dark and they were going to get away with hurting people for their gain. I don’t know any everlasting happiness that was built on people’s tears.

“Did you know about Bab’ Shange and my mother?” I ask.

He frowns, “What about them?”

“He wanted to jump inside the grave and go with her. His wife is rumored to have left him, he confessed that he’s had an affair

with my mother for almost two decades,” I say.

He’s breathing hard and gasping for air.

“Water, water!”

I go to the kitchen and get him water with a glass. I’m not even that bothered with their infidelity, they both cheated on one another, I guess even after everything they did together they were still not happy.

He gulps down the water. “Where’s my phone?”

“You don’t have one, I think someone took it from the accident scene. Why do you need it?”

“I want Shange to come here,” he’s fuming.

“You have a cast on your leg, what are you going to do to him? Is he Sbonga’s father, they resemble one another?” I ask.

“Shange is my friend,” he’s still in disbelief.

I think that’s what made everything easy.

Shange literally knows everything about

him. He knew when he was going to the

toilet, when he was going to see Aunt

Teekay, and when he was coming back. He

drove him to his secret locations and came

back to fuck his wife.

“I think he’s Sbonga’s father, he’s caring

towards her and always asking if she’s

okay. Maybe I’m his daughter too.” I know

I’m not, I look like this man from head to

toe.

“You’re my daughter!” he’s yelling.

“Don’t yell baba, neighbors will think you’re losing it and start talking again,” I say.

“Call Shange for me,” he insists.

I don’t know what he thinks he will do to Shange. Shange is bigger, taller and more muscular than him. And his both legs work. I’m not calling him, we’ve had enough embarrassing moments in this family. Him losing a fight against his brother-husband would be the talk of the streets. Cast on or off, where has he ever fought and won a fight? Even my mother beat the shit out of him.

I will go and get his meds.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 79

“Another one. Step up to the ball, take a breath and then swing again,” Mnguni.

This is his fourth attempt, he still can't get it right. Mnguni is not the perfect teacher either, whereas he's doing all this to impress him. He's the only young-looking guy out here, the rest are his father's agemates with grey hair. He's bored, his black ass prefers soccer over this.

“One day I will come with you and your brother,” Mnguni says.

It’s another bad swing!

“Isn’t Sphiwe too young for this?” He’s stepping back, it’s time he takes a backseat and watches the old man do what he does best.

“I’m talking about Solwazi,” Mnguni says.

Things haven’t been bad between them, they even have each other’s number now. But they never talked it out, so there’s no possible friendship anytime soon. He doesn’t see himself playing golf with Solwazi.

“Did Nondu tell you that Nzuzo’s damages will be paid for this coming weekend?”

Mnguni asks.

“Yeah, she did.” This is not a conversation he’s keen to have. The whole thing of Solwazi paying cows to Nondu’s family and owning up to taking her virginity.

“Are you okay with it?” Mnguni knows him well.

“Yeah, I’m happy for her, he’s finally accepting that he’s the father,” he says.

“That’s what a man does. And you? What’s next?” Mnguni asks.

“She hasn’t said yes yet, but I’m definitely going to ask for her hand in marriage.”

“You haven’t baked anything?” – Mnguni.

He breaks into laughter. Yeah, he’s really close to 30, the heat have kids is pressured everyday.

“She doesn’t even negotiate there, I have to wait two years,” he says.

Mnguni shakes his head, disappointed.

“She makes the rules, hey?”

Nkalipho shrugs, “Her body, her rules.”

“Well, you have a little sibling on the way, my wife and I co-own each other’s bodies.”

“What???” Nkalipho, his eyes widen.

Mnguni narrows his eyes, “Didn’t I tell you beforehand?”

“Baba, I thought you were just pulling my leg. You’re going to have a little baby, seriously? This is so inappropriate, you’re going to be 60 and attending Grade R graduation?”

“And this bothers you how? Nondu won’t let Nzuzo come and stay with us, and you’re nutting on the thighs waiting for God knows how many years, Sphiwe needs someone to play with,” Mnguni says.

“So I’m the reason why you’re old and having babies?” This man simply doesn’t want to age, he gets confused because of the young wife. He wants to try another swing, practice makes perfect.

Mnguni’s phone beeps, he reads the message and lifts his head to Nkalipho.

“Sorry son, we have to go, my wife needs mealie-mealie,” he says.

Nkalipho frowns, “For what?”

“Cravings, let’s go.”

Okay, this one is going to be a nightmare.

**“I thought we’d grab breakfast after this,”
Nkalipho complains.**

“We’ll eat at home,” Mnguni says.

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NONDUMEZULU

**I don’t know if it makes sense but I’m
grateful that Solwazi is finally doing this.
It’s his responsibility, always have been, no
fish should be applauded for swimming. But
I went through a lot, I never thought this
day would come. My son has been
acknowledged, he’s got a verified identity
now. I’m grateful not only to Solwazi, but**

to Samantha as well. She's allowed him to come with everything that he owes. They chose a fat cow, I thought they'd embarrass me and bring a thin cow. Mam' Busi would've laughed from her grave. Babo actually came, I didn't expect it, from what I've heard he's always locked inside his house, his social skills have dropped to zero. I can't believe my mother is the one handing out meat and he's here with an empty plastic bag to receive. And this is just a beginning, soon there will be abakhongi at the gate asking for my hand in marriage. I haven't given Nkalipho a yes, but there's no doubt in my heart that I'd like to spend the rest of my life with him. I just wanted to think first, he knows that I think before making decisions, he will be

patient like he was when he was asking me out.

Nzuzo runs in with a smile stuck on his face.

“Aunt Teekay is here!” he’s screaming.

This day is going to be triggering for Babo. I did ask Aunt Teekay to come but I didn’t think she’d come because she’s still swimming in love. I pick Nzuzo up and go to the door. Today I don’t even feel his weight because he’s the main character of the day. If it wasn’t for him none of this would be happening. I mean, this big day.

“Finally, we know who made you pregnant.”

Aunt Teekay though!

“Where’s my meat?” She’s making her way in.

“It’s inside the fridge, you’re late,” I say.

“Sorry baby, I got caught up.” She turns back and glances at me. “Are you going to work?”

Well, I’m fancy dressed up.

“No, I’m not going anywhere,” I say.

“Nondumezulu don’t tell me you’re dressed up for amahlawulo, who does that? This is a very embarrassing day if we are being honest, you should be hiding in your room because you disappointed us,” she says.

I roll my eyes and adjust my headwrap.

“Please do me a favor, don’t touch any of this meat, you’re not allowed to s’phoxi sengane,” she turns and walks away.

Nobody told me that, I’ve had some of the meat. It was delicious.

My phone beeps, it’s Nkalipho’s text. He’s asking if we can video-call, I’ve been quite busy since morning, we haven’t talked.

He video-calls, I only realize once I see myself on the screen that I went overboard with the headwrap and make-up. Nkalipho is definitely going to freak out.

“Hey babe,” I say.

I can just see his face.

“Hey, you look...beautiful. What’s up?”

“Nothing much, everything is done,” I say.

“Am I going to see you before you leave?

Maybe have dinner with me and sleep over?”

“You can come to the house tomorrow, I’ve had a long day and everyone is still here.”

“Okay,” he says.

I can sense that he’s not okay, I’ve grown very protective of him, maybe way more than acceptable.

“I will make a plan,” I say on second thought.

“Okay, I will call you later....” He takes a long pause, then says, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I say.

Now I have to make a plan, deceive my mother and go for a sleepover at a man's house. I'm surely letting guests inside my father's kraal, I'm not even shameful.

"Mommy, am I going to go home now?"

I'd forgotten about my lifetime plus-one.

What does he mean go home?

"Which home?" I ask.

"Baba's home to see the big mkhulu," he says.

I know better than to think everything Nzuzo says is out of childishness.

"I don't know, why do you ask?"

"Because the big mkhulu said I must visit while I was asleep."

It's the Dlomos, there's said to be this dominant grandfather from Solwazi's mother's side who protects everything that comes with his name. That's why he messes up people's lives and gets away with it. Now that mkhulu wants Nzuzo to visit the old Dlomo homestead, where they lived before stealing people's inheritances. I really don't know how I feel about that, Solwazi and Samantha and their princesses being away with my son. They just started liking him recently, before then they never did or cared, I still don't trust them that much.

"You will go, just not today," I tell him.

"When?" He's staring up at me.

“Do you want meat?” I don’t know how else to shut him up, let me just feed him some meat of ‘shame’. He’s running after me, he’s happy and instantly forgotten about the big mkhulu.

At long last the locals have left, now it’s just two of my mother’s friends from church, Aunt Teekay, and me and my main character child. Well, well, well, look who’s walking in with his injured leg. Yeap, Babo. This is awkward, Aunt Teekay doesn’t lift her eyes to look at him. I hope he doesn’t say or do anything dramatic as fainting.

“Sisi where’s my parcel?” he asks.

“Oh, you’re leaving?” My mother stands up.

They disappear to the kitchen.

My curious eye is on Aunt Teekay, she doesn't seem to be moved by Babo's presence. But there's no way any sane woman would choose Babo over malum' Khulekani. He's got the looks but without any strong personality any woman would run away. Do I feel sorry for him? Yes, sometimes. I know he has some personal issues that are rooted in his childhood and Mam' Busi knew that, that's why it was easy for her to turn him into what he is today. Salo is only coming later to eat the meat, she cooks for Babo and does his laundry. If she's going to be away for a day or two she leaves cooked food in the fridge. Hopefully by the time her leave ends he

will be okay, because who's going to take care of him?

I don't know how I'm going to ask my mother to babysit my almost-nine year old. She knows I'm not going to work tomorrow, there's no excuse for me not to sleep at home. Aunt Teekay will make matters worse, she's clearly sleeping over and keeping an eye on me, making sure I don't eat the meat. My mother's church friends finally leave, I have to sum up courage to break the news. But first, I need to make sure they have nothing to roast me for. I run Nzuzo a bath and put him in his pyjamas. He's a karate kid lately, always kicking air and speaking Chinese. I drag

him to the lounge with me, they're watching TV. It's just after 5pm, I need to start packing my toiletries.

"Mama can I go for a visit today?" I just ask, straight away.

They both turn and look at me.

"It's 5pm, who are you visiting?" – my mother.

"Nkalipho," I say shyly.

"You can't sleep at home for two days with your son?" Now she's trying to make me feel like a bad mother. Nzuzo visits me frequently, it's just this one night.

"It's a special day for him," I lie.

"His birthday?" – Aunt Teekay.

"Yes," I lie smoothly.

It doesn't look like they believe me, but I won't back down.

"Make us tea first," my mother says.

I don't walk to the kitchen, I fly. I wish I had bought a new kettle, this one can boil water until Jesus comes back. I'm impatiently tapping my foot down, waiting.

My phone rings, it's Nkalipho wanting to know if I was able to make a plan.

I reply: Come, I'm getting ready.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 80

NONDUMEZULU

We arrive in his house, he keeps glancing at me and not saying anything.

“Are you okay?” I ask dumping myself on the couch.

“I’m fine, wena?” He stares at me.

He’s definitely not fine.

“I’m good, just worried about your mood,” I say.

“No baby, I’m okay. I just had a long day. How did everything go?”

“It all went well, he did everything he was asked to do, very surprising. But I’m happy for Nzuzo, and for myself because he fixed

my reputation. I've never been a girl who has multiple sexual partners, I'd never not know who the father of my child is and lie."

"I'm sorry you went through that, I wish I had met you sooner," he says.

I look at him, our eyes lock. He's not happy but I think this is one of those things you deal with when you're involved with someone who has a child somewhere else. It's not like Solwazi came to pay lobola, but he's still a work in progress, I know how he is as a person.

"What are we going to eat? Did you cook?" I ask.

"We will eat at my dad's house," he says.

It's his family tradition that they eat at other's house and can fetch cooked food

from each other. But I don't want to be that girl who always come to eat, without helping out, and then cross the road to cuddle with her boyfriend.

“Masentle asked that we come, she cooked for the whole family,” he says before I raise any complaint. “We thought you'd bring us meat though.”

My eyes widen. “Meat? Aunt Teekay calls it the meat of shame.”

He's having a good laugh at last.

We get ready, I wear his jacket, it's a bit cold outside now. He's happier, we don't drive, we walk by foot. It's just across the road, a very short distance. The Mngunis are naturally warm people, you feel it from

the door step. Sphiwe comes running, then stops with his face down when he realizes that Nzuzo is not with me.

“Where is Nzu?” he asks.

“He’s going to come tomorrow,” I lie.

He nods and runs back inside.

We find Masentle setting up the table, she’s all dressed up, I thought we were just have dinner at home. By the way she took me out for lunch to ‘offload’. And trust me, what she calls life problems is what most people dream of. I just sat there, ate ribs and told her everything was going to be okay, she was going to find a holiday house of her dreams and get Mnguni to agree to let her do the interior, and by that I mean pay someone to do it.

“You look gorgeous in that jacket,” she says.

I’m wearing a big jacket over a knee-length dress, the jacket sleeves cover my hands.

How is that gorgeous? Nkalipho disappears with Sphiwe, I hear them chatting with their father somewhere.

I sit on the chair. Should I be helping? No, I’m not really anything here, just a known girlfriend. Time will come for me to do things around this house, I must not rush.

She’s laid food all over the table, it’s a feast. I wonder what they’re celebrating, maybe an anniversary.

The men join us, Nkalipho sits next to me.

Mnguni is all over his wife. Did he even see me?

“Baba say hello to Nondu,” Nkalipho says.

He looks up, sees me, and then smiles. Did he really see only Masentle on this table?

“I’m sorry, how are you?” He’s smiling.

“I’m good baba, thanks,” I say.

“Thank you for joining us,” he says and looks back at Masentle. What is he removing from her cheek? Or he’s just caressing it because she has a beautiful skin. A

Nkalipho clears his throat and stands to take the jug of juice.

“Juice, babe?” he asks.

I nod.

He pours two glasses, and then in a tumbler for Sphiwe.

“Shall we eat?” he asks.

Silence...

Masentle can't hear, not with Mnguni all over her face.

Nkalipho dishes up for himself, Sphiwe and I. Sphiwe goes to the floor in front of the TV.

We eat, the two are still in their own world, we don't exist in it.

I'm trying to keep my eyes off them but Mnguni is doing too much.

They're finally eating, but he still can't keep his hands to himself.

Masentle looks up with a smile stuck on her face.

“We have an announcement to make,” she says.

I should’ve known, they’re up to something.

“Please don’t,” Nkalipho hisses.

I look at him. What’s wrong with him not wanting to hear the good news?

Mnguni is smiling. He’s really happy.

“So we...”

“Baba please,” Nkalipho again.

He’s interrupting, I give him a look.

Mnguni continues, “We are pregnant!”

Okay, wait a minute...they? So they’re having sex and creating proofs.

Nkalipho is gulping down juice. He looks so embarrassed, now this is funny because

he's always laughing at me when my mother reads me publicly. His father has pulled a last number on him.

"How far?" I ask, if they're happy then I'm happy for them too.

"7 weeks," Masentle says.

Everytime she opens her mouth Mnguni smiles.

"Congratulations, this is so wonderful," I say.

Nkalipho is eating, really not excited about the news.

"Mnguni, dessert?" Masentle asks.

"Yes," Mnguni grins.

Masentle picks a bowl, just as she's about to get him some he stops her.

“I thought you were talking about the desseeert,” he says.

I almost choke trying to stop myself from laughing.

“Have self-control Mnguni. Dessert or not?” Masentle, she’s blushing.

“Please keep it warm for later,” Mnguni says.

Warm dessert? I’m going to die of laughter on this table.

Nkalipho’s frustrated heavy breaths are even more funny.

They sit next to each other, Mnguni can’t keep his hands to himself.

After they’re done they both stand, holding hands. Masentle is not even showing yet,

but he's treating her like a heavily pregnant woman.

“Nkalipho please put Sphiwe in bed for us, we are going to have an early night,” Masentle says.

Nkalipho looks at them, “It's 8pm and you're going to bed.”

“We have a long night ahead,” – Mnguni.

I expected such answer, he's high on love and lust today.

Nkalipho sighs.

They walk away.

“This is so fuckin' embarrassing!”

I laugh, “They're married, let him be happy.”

“I’m happy that he’s happy. But can he be not horny?”

“That’s too much to ask,” I laugh.

He shakes his head and picks his fork.

Sphiwe takes his time getting sleepy.

Nkalipho has read him two bedtime stories, we’ve watched 20 minutes long cartoons, he still wouldn’t sleep. But he’s finally fell asleep, thank God. It’s just after 9pm when we leave, it’s late and cold. Nkalipho takes one of his father’s cars, he’s too busy fucking to even hear us driving out. I pray Nkalipho turns out like him when he reaches his 50s. I need that funny and naughty side. I think it’s what has kept them tight for a good decade.

We get inside the house, I'm very tired, I just need a foot massage and the bed.

"Did you keep any warm dessert for me?"

He's holding me from behind.

So he's stealing his father's lines now?

"By the way, my hand is ready," I say.

"For what?" He lifts his eyes to me.

I don't answer, he looks lost

"I'm saying your uncles can set the date," I say.

He's lost, but within a second he's found.

He kneels down in front of me, he's so dramatic. He grabs my hand like he's praying for it.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," he says.

I lift him up and kiss his lips. He picks me up and swings me around. I'm giggling, gosh this is so old school. He carries me to the bedroom like I weigh nothing and throws me on the bed. He's unbuckling his belt. Then he pulls my legs apart and lies in between.

He onslaughts me with a passionate kiss and grabs his jacket that I'm wearing up to have access to my boobs. Is he really celebrating us with sex?

He lifts my dress and puts his lips on my neck. He's not patient, my panty is at the side within a minute and he's sticking his one finger inside me while rubbing my clit with a thumb. My mind connects with

what's happening to my body, the response I give is moisture.

“I love you,” he says, his voice sounding very rough against my ear.

I pull him closer to my chest, I want to taste his lips. But he lifts his torso and stares down at me. His eyes are getting watery and smaller. He's neither slow nor very fast. But he's inside me very unexpected, I feel my core stretching to accommodate this unexpected guest. He pulls, comes out creamy, and uses his hand to keep the panty stretched to the side.

He penetrates again, this time deeper. He looks at me in the eyes, I have my mouth wide open. He pulls out, I release a moan. He pushes in again, this time he starts

pumping and humping. The whole time
maintaining eye contact.

This is the Nkalipho I met and changed.

“Nkaliphooooo!” I can’t even moan and
keep up with his speed.

He’s just getting it, deep and fast.

My body trembles, when he pulls out
there’s a splash.

I’m calling his name again.

He pulls my legs up to his shoulders, both
of them.

Is he trying to kill me?

He’s slower in this position, he has to
because he’s inside too deep.

But that’s not his mood for this moment, he
lets my legs down and lies on my chest.

He's grinding, body to body. His sweat on mine, I'm breathing his air.

"Stha...sthandwa sami," he's pressing his face very close to mine.

His grip on me is very tight. His voice is trembling.

I close my eyes and just listen to him falling apart. He's talking on my ear, he's professing his love even though I can't tell everything he's saying. He spills inside me, his body trembles.

I watch his face changing, him floating in a different wave, then gaining composure and losing his strength. He drops his head, breathing very hard.

"I've been ready since day one to marry you," he says.

I wrap my arms around his waist. I'm one of the luckiest girls in the world.

He lifts his face covered in sweat and smiles.

"Was I too rough?" he asks.

He knows he was, but I think he was just showing me that I can enjoy any pace if I'm feeling him and connecting to him.

"It was good," I say.

He smiles, he's proud.

I'm still into passionate and slow, but we can have this once in a while.

"Let me get a towel," he says after sending his hand between my legs.

He comes and wipes me. Then for whatever point asks that I take the towel

and wipe him as well. Hey, this love thing. I
wipe his dick and help him pull up his
boxers.

We lie on the bed on our backs holding
hands.

“Did you see us getting here?” I mean,
when was the last time we fought? I fought
him over sex, possessiveness, jealousy,
emotional blackmail, and simply breathing.
And he fought with me almost over
everything, even thinking that there are
other human beings with penis between
their legs. We are such a piece of work!

“Yes, I did,” he says.

I look at him, eyebrows raised.

He kmew???

“How did you know I wasn’t going to leave and you weren’t going to get tired and leave?”

“I wouldn’t have allowed it to happen,” he says.

I tilt my head to the side. Allow?

He looks at me, “You’re dearly beloved, I wouldn’t have been able to live without you.”

Right!

I kiss his lips.

Wait....

“Babe you need to give me a letter or a 5 carat diamond ring,” I say.

He looks away...he’s actually looking at me, with a line creased on his forehead.

“What do you have?” I ask.

“Money,” he says.

**Who proposes with money? Am I going to
post money on Instagram?**

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 81

SALO MHLONGO

**I couldn't come on time, I had a doctor's
appointment, from there I took Khaya**

home because his grandmother wanted to see him. I just arrived, all the lights are off but the door is unlocked. That's alarming, I know very well that he's home, he hardly ever goes out.

"Baba?" I yell.

No answer.

I turn the kitchen light on and leave my bag on the counter and go to his bedroom. The door is slightly open, I step inside and turn the light on. He's in bed, wide awake, just staring at the wall.

"Baba," I call him.

He turns his head and looks at me, then he exhales heavily and sits up.

"You're back," he says.

“Yes, I got delayed.” I know he’s going through a lot but he mustn’t scare me.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He frowns like I’m just pulling the question out of nowhere.

“Yes, I’m okay. Why?” he asks.

“You were lying in the dark,” I say.

He shrugs, “I was just thinking.”

“About mom?” I ask.

“Yeah, and life in general.”

This baby is getting heavy. I put him on his grandfather’s bed and sit next to him.

“Did you go to MaNkosi’s house?” I ask.

“Yes, I put the meat in the fridge. I don’t know if you want me to grill some for you,” he says.

“Don’t worry, I will prepare it myself.” He’s still balancing on one leg and I don’t want him to be near the fire or to use the stove because sometimes he blacks out.

“It still feels awkward but I’m getting used to it,” I say looking around the bedroom. You can tell that she’s no longer here, you can feel her absence, but I’m adapting to the new dynamics very well.

“You have your people now, that’s why it’s easy,” he says.

I look at him, “My people?”

“Yes, the Zungus.” He heaves a deep sigh and looks at Khaya. He smiles and pulls his little hand out of the blanket. This is the first time he touches him.

“He’s going to be very dark,” he says.

“Baba that’s not a compliment,” I’m offended because dark babies are not considered beautiful, especially when they’re still little. I haven’t received a ‘wow, this is a cute baby’, except his own family. Everyone who sees him just says, ‘kuzoba yindoda le- he’s going to be a real man’.

“I didn’t say he’s ugly, he looks like his father. In that family they’re very...masculine,” he says and grins.

“Just say they’re ugly,” I say.

He laughs for the first time in months. Even though it’s at the expense of my son’s family, but I’m happy to see this light side of him in a long time.

“Did you fall for my mother because of looks?” I ask.

He stops laughing and covers Khaya with his blanket.

I've been too hard on him, whether I like what his past actions have been or not, his blood runs through me. I have to help him heal, because his well-being affects me emotionally and financially anyway.

“Even though she was beautiful, I fell for because I needed to have someone in my life. Someone I could count on, share my thoughts and inner world with. She was that person, I loved and needed her,” he says.

**“Do you have abandonment issues?”
Maybe I could've asked this question in a less direct way. He's a black man, he doesn't understand such issues.**

“No,” he frowns.

“But you pleased her, doing everything she asked you to do because you didn’t want her to leave you.”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” he denies, shifting his eyes away.

I guess this is taking another direction he doesn’t like.

“Let me go and start dinner,” I stand up.

Khaya is asleep but I won’t leave him with his grandfather.

“Do you talk with Nondu?” he asks as I pick Khaya up.

“Yes, we talk.” We’ve never stopped talking, both of us are independent thinkers so it was easy for us to keep our parents

issues aside and be who we've always been to each other.

"How is the new job?" he asks.

Okay, I didn't expect this question. He can see the way I'm looking at him, I'm asking myself why he wants to know, they have a horrible past.

"I was just asking," he shrugs.

I don't think he's a bad person if there's no influence around him, he won't harm her, but it still raises eyebrows.

"Baba are you ever going to apologize to her?"

"Didn't we apologize before?"

"You were making things right with MaNkosi and the ancestors, not the main

person who was wronged the most. I think if you do that you would be at peace, whether she accepts your apology or not.”

“Okay,” he says.

I don't know if he gets it or just dismissing me.

I let him be and go to the kitchen to start with dinner.

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We are having dinner, Khaya is asleep, it's just the two of us. We are on the couch, the TV is playing, all the table manners my mother taught have been forgotten.

“I thought about what you said,” he says.

I look up, confused.

“What did I say?” I ask.

“Apologizing to Nondu as a person. I should’ve done it a long time ago. After that I can go away and cool my head for a while.” He started this well, but going away?

“Where will you go?” I ask.

“I will visit my uncle’s house,” he says.

I don’t think it’s a good decision but I don’t want to make it look like I’m now dictating how he should live his life. If he thinks that’s going to heal him, then I need to stand by his side.

“For how long?” I ask.

“I don’t know, I’m not abandoning you though, I will be home anytime you need me. I just want to breathe, this place is suffocating me,” he says.

I can see that he’s struggling, he’s dealing with loss and gossips. It’s a lot and him leaving would mean I don’t have to be here, I won’t have a middle-aged man to look after.

“Have you talked to Bab’ Shange?” I think it’s important that they reach some sort of understanding for Sbonga’s sake.

“I will see him before I leave.” His face changes when he says that. I can see his jaw tightening.

“To talk, right?” I ask.

He doesn't answer. Ey, this man mustn't try anything stupid.

"When do you want to see Nondu?" I change the topic.

"Tomorrow, if you can organize it," he says.

"I think she's working but let me confirm." I take out my phone and text Nondu. I'm not going to tell her who I will be bringing to her. She doesn't respond immediately but eventually she does, I'm welcome to pop in after 4pm when she's come back from work.

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NONDUMEZULU

I don't know if I was allowed to tell Dr Manzini that Salo will be coming here with Khaya today. It didn't look like he knew or liked that he wasn't informed. I understand she's his brother's babymama, but I don't think Salo is that kind of a girl, she obviously won't report everything to him.

I wasn't going to cook, I only do if Nkalipho is coming over, but today I will cook because I have a guest. I can't wait for Khaya to grow up so that I can start buying him danones and chips, training myself to be a future rich aunt.

Even though she's not breastfeeding, she's a new mom and needs to eat healthily. So I make mash, veges and chicken. She should be here anytime now, if she's still coming. I hope she got the address right.

I'm about to pick my phone when she calls.

I peep through the window and see her car outside the gate.

It's her, I don't answer the phone, I just go and open the gate for her.

I'm happy she's here, I hope she's spending the night. Maybe I should host a ladies night with her and Regina. Dr Manzini will babysit. I think we've grown and gone through a lot, we need to create a safe

space for ourselves where we can offload and advise each other.

“Help me out!” she’s so dramatic.

I think she wants me to get Khaya out for her. I go and open the back door, boom ubaba yini!

I freeze, what is he doing here?

I don’t know when Salo got behind me.

“He wanted to come and see you,” she says.

Here out of all places? Didn’t he see me at home on Saturday?

“I’m sorry I didn’t check with you first, but he’s desperate please,” she begs.

I’m still lost for words. This is my safe space where nobody from Mandeni knows,

except Nkalipho and my mother. Now she's bringing this man here? What if tomorrow she brings him to my workplace? Salo are you the new Busisekile Khumalo now? Did your mother run the witchcraft department so that you can fly?

I close the door, I don't want him to hear this because I have humanity, I don't hurt people's feelings even after they've hurt mine a thousand times. I'm kind-hearted.

"Babo is a witch Salo, how can you bring him here and not even warn me to buy rough salt?" I'm perplexed.

"He's sorry, that's why he's here," she says.

"It wasn't necessary, yazi this house doesn't have izikhonkwane, it wasn't

strengthened, Nkalipho doesn't know those things. If he summons a lightning before he leaves nothing..."

She sighs heavily, "Nothing like that is going to happen. I wouldn't have allowed him inside my car and to hold Khaya for me if he was carrying muthi. But if you're not comfortable you can just talk here, outside."

Sorry I'm being dramatic but that sounds like a good idea.

"Fine, we can talk here," I say.

"Can Khaya and I go inside so that you have privacy?" she asks.

"Yes, please go in, don't go to my bedroom because you will be traumatized."

She laughs, rolling her eyes.

I'm an upcoming Christian Grey, I have cuffs there, I haven't used them and I don't know when I will have the guts to. Imagine Nkalipho having sex with me while I have no control over what he does. I'd wake up with no vagina.

I know how to pretend, I greet Babo like our relationship is still normal.

"I understand why you don't want me here, I don't blame you for that. But I'm happy with the way you live now, you're making a good progress," says the jackal itself.

I just nod, I will never trust him again.

"I didn't think things would get this far when this whole thing started. I was just thinking about my family, especially

Salabenzi because she was a hard worker but nothing was working out for her.”

“Then why didn’t you consult traditional doctors to help her rather than to steal my blessings and block my life?” I thought I was over this, but no I’m still hurt.

“I should’ve done that, nobody would’ve gotten hurt. But I let greed control me and for that I’m sorry. I’m really sorry mntanami. I was supposed to be a father to you and protect you. But I did bad things to you and umzukulu. I took one bad decision and demons piled up on me.”

I’m still stuck on the grandson part. What does he mean he did bad things to me and Nzuzo?

“What did you do to Nzuzo?” I ask.

“Your boyfriend embraced him and took him home. I think his tongue was untied around that time. He can talk without struggles now, right?” He’s saying like that’s a good thing and I must celebrate.

“Did you tie his tongue?” Nzuzo only started talking clearly last year, and yes it was after Nkalipho had come into our lives. He didn’t mix words like he used to. He didn’t learn to express himself in one day, but he’s been very progressive ever since. I didn’t think it was Nkalipho, or rather say AbaNguni’s presence that changed some things. He went to Mnguni’s house as Nkalipho’s stepson and Sphiwe’s friend.

“He’s a special child, we just felt like he was a threat when we found out. I do

apologize my child, sincerely. I even brought this..." He takes out something from the old plastic bag.

I can't tell what this is.

"Even though it's just a small piece left, but this is his amniotic sac that he was born covered with. I got it from the nurse who helped you give birth, I saw her when your mother asked me to drop her off and asked that she keeps it for me because MaKhumalo saw it coming."

My hands are shaking, I want to cry but I don't want to cry. How cruel were they? Even my child, an innocent child!

"You really hate me Babo. What did I ever do to you?" I can't help, the tears are running down.

They saw me struggling, they laughed with people who laughed at me for having a different child. I was told he had a condition, he had all the signs. I tried to get him into schools, different primary schools, but they rejected him saying they don't have teachers who are trained to deal with 'such learners'. I'm sorry but no, this is not happening.

"I can't accept your apology," I tell him.

"God has dealt with me, I've suffered and I'm still going to suffer, I just need you to forgive me."

"I'm sorry, I can't," I turn around and leave.

"Mntaka bhuti, I made mistakes...take this with you at least, burn it with impepho for

him so that his light can shine.” He’s talking about that little piece of the amniotic sac that they’ve kept for years, doing God knows what with it. No thanks, I will find other ways to help my son regarding this matter. I thought I hated this man and his dead wife until now. I really, really hate them.

I don’t know who I must report this to.
Solwazi or Nkalipho?

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 82

SALO MHLONGO

Nondu is walking in crying. It didn't go well, I guess.

“Are you okay?” I ask her.

“Salo please leave,” she says.

“Did he....” I'm trying to hug her.

She shoves me off and screams, “Leave!”

I take my son and make my way out. I only want to know what happened, why is she upset like this.

My dad is still in the car, he's holding a dodgy plastic bag in his hand.

“What is in that plastic bag?” I ask.

“Nzuzo’s amniotic sac,” he says.

I’m confused, did Nondu give it to him?

“What are you doing with it? And why is she crying?”

“I tried to give it back,” he says.

Okay, pause, make the world stop a bit.

“Excuse me?” I’m trying to figure this out.

“How did it get to you?” I ask.

“I spoke to the nurse, she gave it to me...”

I’m still listening, Nondu screams from the door of her house again, she wants us to leave.

I think this man revealed something that worsened the situation and it has to do with this thing in the plastic bag. Did he really go that far? I understand why Nondu

is angry. I wouldn't want someone who toyed with Khaya's life anywhere near me.

I have no choice but to leave, they will never make peace, I need to accept that and understand the damage that was done.

We will talk about this when we get home. I need to know what they did to a child.

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NONDUMEZULU

I called my mother first, then Nkalipho, he's on his way here. I agreed into co-parenting and letting this man back into our lives, so I need to let him know as well.

God knows how much I hate talking to him, it's better when he communicates with my mother, but this is one conversation I need to directly have with him.

He picks up, "Maka Boy."

"Hey, can you talk?"

"Yes, we can. Is everything okay?"

"No," I say, releasing a deep sigh.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I just found out that Nzuzo was born covered with an amniotic sac, you know our African beliefs how that is considered special. I wasn't told, the sac was taken by Babo without my concern and he did things to hinder Nzuzo's mental progress, hence the delayed speech and slowness. I'm not even sure if he's really autistic or it was all

just the side-effects of what was done to him.”

“Yoh!” that’s just his reaction, it’s all he can say.

He’s making me angry, even Nkalipho reacted better than him.

“Is that all you can say?” I ask.

He clears his throat, “Can you give me a bit of time to figure out a way forward and consult my elders, I’m sure they will know what we are supposed to do in a situation like this.”

“I want him dead,” I mean this.

“Maka Boy, I can’t kill, you know I already have that case of running over your aunt.”

“Then bewitch him back,” I say.

**“I don’t know how to bewitch someone,
can we approach this calmly?”**

**Calmly? Is this guy okay upstairs, this is my
son we are talking about. And what does he
mean he can’t bewitch someone, he’s the
biggest witch I know.**

**I click my tongue and end the call. Let me
block him as well, I don’t know what I was
thinking, he doesn’t care about Nzuzo.**

**I cooked for someone who came here to
bring her evil father. I don’t know what she
was thinking, now her father knows where I
live, he will give his baboons the accurate
address. Maybe I need to relocate, I can’t
put my life at risk like that.**

Nkalipho arrives, he's turned out to be the only person I can trust.

He hugs me for what feels like eternity.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, pulling me to the couch.

"I'm angry at all of them," I say.

He raises his eyebrow, "Them?"

"Salo, Babo and Solwazi. That one is just a useless father, he's telling me to calm down and wait for his stupid elders to advise him. He's not a saint, what's hard about killing Babo?"

He pulls me to his lap, I lie there and shed more tears.

“Nzuzo is more important, why don’t we figure out how to reverse the spell from him first?”

“We will do that but Babo needs to suffer as well,” I say.

“Okay, he will suffer,” he says.

This is what I want to hear, I want Babo to suffer, he hasn’t felt anything yet.

“Do you want coffee?” he asks.

“No, I don’t want coffee, I want strong lemon juice.” I want something bitter as me.

He gets up and goes to the kitchen. I don’t know if I have lemon juice, I don’t remember myself buying it. I switch the annoying TV off and lie on the couch listening to my running thoughts.

Why can't I hear Nkalipho in the kitchen?

Making lemon juice doesn't take hours.

I get up and go to the kitchen. He's not here, did he run away because of my anger?

I look outside the window and see him coming through the gate. He's coming from the neighbors house with lemons in his hands. Did he really go to that old woman's house who never greet anyone and asked for lemons?

"You could've just made me juice," I say, feeling guilty.

"It's okay, I didn't buy them, she said I can get as much as I like from the tree," he says.

"Did you climb the tree?" I ask.

He laughs, “Who climbs a lemon tree?
You’re a true township girl.”

I watch him slicing the lemons and
squeezing the juice into a cup, then
carefully taking out the seeds. I love him.
He turns his head and frowns, I’m just
staring without a flinch.

“Are you planning my murder?” he asks.

He’s so silly, why would I kill one person
who makes my life make sense?

“I’m just appreciating your presence in my
life, I’m lucky,” I say.

He smiles and turns back to the lemon juice
he’s making.

“Why didn’t you tell me early that I need to
make you lemon juice to win you over?”

I laugh, my mood is a bit light now.

We go back to the lounge. He's drinking water and I'm drinking my lemon juice.

"Are you always sober now?" I ask.

He chuckles, "No."

"Do you still feel like you need alcohol?"

"No, when was the last time you saw me drunk?"

"When you went out with Dr Manzini," I say.

"And that was a long time ago, my life has changed Nondu, all because of you," he says.

I'm blushing like a new bride. I'm glad I've made a difference in his life because he's

made a huge one in mine as well. If there's one tantrum I will be forever grateful for my son, it's definitely him throwing a drink on Nkalipho's car.

His phone rings, he checks the caller and then looks at me weirdly.

"Who is it?" I ask.

"Solwazi," he says.

I blocked that one, for the fifth time, if not the sixth.

Nkalipho answers, I wish he can put him on loudspeaker.

"Yes, it's all good...I'm with her....no, she didn't tell me...I don't know....don't worry about it....okay sharp." He drops the phone from his ear and looks at me.

“You blocked him?” he asks.

“Yes, he wasn’t being useful,” I say.

“I understand where you’re coming from, baby. But you need to calm down, despite of everything that happened in the past, Nzuzo loves his father and he knows exactly who his father is between Solwazi and I. Imagine how he would feel if Solwazi was to go to jail for murder, again he wouldn’t have a father,” he says.

Okay, maybe I let anger control me. I definitely don’t want him to go to jail, because unlike me, Nzuzo doesn’t care that he’s just met this man after long 8 years of his life, his father is the hill he’s willing to die on. And that’s the beautiful thing about children, they don’t hold grudges.

“I don’t want to overstep, he wants a chance to fix this, let him do it. I will be here anytime you feel like you need me, or Nzuzo needs me.” He’s a very kind person, Solwazi doesn’t deserve the respect he has for him.

“Okay,” I say.

“You agree?” He seems shocked.

“Yes, I get it,” I nod.

“But I will pray for Babo’s downfall,” I tell him.

“How down do you think he can go? He’s already on the ground.”

“Under the ground he must go,” I say.

He laughs, I can’t believe three hours later I’m laughing at it too.

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SALO MHLONGO

There's peace-making round two. I didn't know about this one, I just saw Bab' Shange arriving.

I haven't gotten a chance to confront him about what him and my mother did to Nzuzo. It's something no mother can forgive, I'm angry with Nondu about this. Was anyone safe from them? I'm starting to wonder if nothing was done to me and my siblings as well.

I'm not going to involve myself in his and Bab' Shange's issues. They don't concern me, it's about their friendship. I'm in my room, having a chat with my son. I'm doing all the talking; as myself and talking on his behalf as well. He's just staring at me like he's seeing a very abnormal person.

My phone rings, disturbing our deep mother and son late conversation.

It's Nkatha. Are we getting our goodnight at 19h14 today?

"Hello," I answer.

"Hey, are you back home?"

Wait a minute...

"Back home?" I don't remember telling him that I will go somewhere today.

“Nondu told me that you were coming to her house,” he says.

Really, how was that necessary?

“Yes, I’m back home,” I say.

“Is Khaya okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, here he is staring at me,” I say.

“He’s studying you,” he always sounds happy when he’s talking about Khaya.

“He’s intelligent,” he says.

I don’t think it’s possible for a baby to be intelligent, I mean he can’t even say what’s wrong with him, he just cries.

“What are you going to read him today?” he asks.

“Hlomu The Wife,” I say.

“What is that?” Is he from Mars?

“It’s a story of a young journalist who falls in love with...” He doesn’t even wait for me to finish.

“You can read that in bed when he’s asleep and have your fantasies. Tomorrow we will go and buy him books. A baby is never too young, if you start reading to him now the roots of language will develop in his brain before he even start talking,” he says.

“But Khaya doesn’t even listen,” I say.

“Believe me, he does. Even the sound of your voice alone is soothing to him.”

“Really? But he wakes up when I talk too loud while he’s asleep.” We are going to talk for hours, we always do when it’s about parenting. I get up with the phone on

my ear and put my slops on. I need to boil water before Khaya finishes this bottle.

“That’s not the point, even if you’re not reading to him, try to have a one-on-one conversation with him, rub his head and be gentle. You will see what I’m talking about,” he says.

“He stares at me when I do that,” I say.

“And you’re telling me he doesn’t listen.”
He’s laughing.

“He thinks I’m not normal, you should see the...” I see two feet on the floor, I scream and jump when I see no emotion from the person’s body and blood. I run back to my bedroom screaming, I didn’t even see who that is. It’s a man though, I don’t know if

it's my dad or Bab' Shange or someone else.

"Salo...Salo," someone keeps calling my name.

I'm standing behind the locked door of my bedroom, screaming for my dad to come and help me.

The person calling me is in my hand. It's Nkatha on the phone.

I lift the phone to my ear, my whole body is shaking.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"There's someone on the floor in a pool of blood. Please come and help me, I'm scared."

"Did you see who it was?" he asks.

“No, I was in my room, I didn’t hear anything, then I went ro to the kitchen to boil water and I saw his feet...”

“Okay, the police are on their way, stay where you are, don’t get out of the room and don’t drop the call, I will stay on the line,” he says.

I’ve never been this scared in my life. But he said the police are on their way, I need to try and stay calm for my safety.

Surprisingly Khaya is quiet, he must’ve sensed that I need him to be calm and not put our lives in danger.

“Salabenzi,” that’s my dad’s voice.

“Baba?” I get up from the floor and unlock the door.

I’m relieved he’s here.

“Ba...” I step back, why does he have blood in his hands?

“Don’t be scared, I won’t hurt you or my grandson. I’m leaving, if the police get here and ask questions just tell them I killed Shange and you don’t know where I am,” he says.

“You killed Bab’ Shange? Is that him lying there?” If I don’t press my legs together I’m going to pee on myself.

“I’m leaving, we will see each other again, I promise. Take care of your siblings, I love you.” He turns and walks away. He’s not even carrying a bag, where is he going?

“Baba you can’t leave me with a dead body, the police are going to think it’s me

and take me to court. Please don't leave me, I'm scared."

He doesn't even turn, he leaves.

I feel something warm running between my legs.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 83

SALO MHLONGO

MaNkosi arrived before the police, she then asked for help from the neighbors. Before I knew it there was a crowd outside the house. Khaya will not remember this day, but I will never forget it. Walking over a dead body with my son on my back. He had a knife stuck on the side of his face. I've never seen anything like that. Even when the police came I couldn't speak, all I was doing was to cry. MaNkosi asked that they take my statement tomorrow because of the state I was in. She was the one who helped the police, giving them every possible place my dad could've run to. I don't think he's far, there are no taxis at this time and he doesn't have his own transport. I suspect he's at the nyanga's place, the one he was keeping Aunt Teekay

at. But I don't say anything to the police, not because I'm trying to protect him, my mind is just everywhere.

My home is now a crime scene, MaNkosi managed to fetch Khaya's bag and milk from the house. I'm scared to even move from this couch and go to the bathroom. I don't know Bab' Shange's picture will ever fade away.

It's after 8pm when MaNkosi tells me there's a car that looks like Khaya's uncle's car outside my gate. I don't know where my phone is, he must've called. I don't think I can go outside, MaNkosi will have to forgive me.

“Can you tell him that I'm here?” I'm sending an elder on an errand.

But it's MaNkosi, she's kind and understanding. She goes, she's not scared of crossing the road but she also saw Bab' Shange. I don't even want to imagine what his wife is going through. First it was my mother sleeping with her husband, now her husband has killed him. She probably hates everything that has a Mhlongo name.

I have Khaya on my back strapped with a towel. I don't want to put him down, if I have to run I want to do so without any hustles. He seems to love being on my back, I don't know if he's at the right age for it, but from now on I will be doing it more often.

Nkatha walks in with MaNkosi behind him.
She gives us privacy after offering him a
seat.

He comes and unties the towel knot over
my chest. He lets him sleep on his arm.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, not looking
at me.

“I don’t know,” I shrug.

He looks up, damn he’s angry.

“If you stayed at home none of this
would’ve happened,” he says.

So he’s taking it there.

“This is my home, you know very well that
I was home because my dad was injured.”

“And you’re addicted to trauma, everytime
something is not right uthwala ikhanda

uzozifaka khona.” (you carry your head and involve yourself) I didn’t expect to be talked to this harsh. I just saw a dead man that my dad killed while I was in the house with my son. He needs to cut me some slack.

“You’re exercising your right to make your own decisions and you make the craziest ones, knowing very well that it affects me.” He’s making this about him, the death of a stranger.

“How is Bab’ Shange’s death your problem?” I ask.

“You’re my problem, not him.” Hhayi-ke.

I didn’t ask him to be my superman, he’s only coming now when the dust has settled.

MaNkosi saw everything and took me out of the bedroom, yet she's not yelling at me.

"Did you come here to shout?" I ask.

"I'm not shouting at you," he's shouting.

"I'm not deaf, you're shouting. Why don't you just leave?"

"I'm leaving with Khaya, you can stay here and save more people." He stands up with Khaya. I can't believe we are having a fight in someone's house. Mankosi is hearing this from the kitchen, I'm so embarrassed.

I take Khaya's bag and follow him. I need to take my stuff from the house as well. He will go inside and take them for me, he's a man.

"Sally you're leaving?" Mankosi asks, looking at me.

“Yes, I will come to the police station in the morning.”

“Won’t it cause problems with the law?”

She’s asking out of concern. I’m not a suspect but I’m an eyewitness, I need to cooperate with the police.

“No Ma, she’s not even leaving the province, it won’t be a problem,” Nkatha says.

She nods with relief, “Okay, please be safe, take care of her, she saw a very traumatic thing.”

“I will take care of her, thank you,” Nkatha.

We walk out and get inside his car. I tell him that I need a few things from the house, then after that we don’t speak.

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I went straight to bed when we arrived yesterday. I'm only realizing now when I wake up that Khaya is not next to me. I'm surprised I had such a deep sleep, I didn't think I'd be able to forget Bab' Shange's lifeless body. There's a covered plate of food next to the bed. Nkatha must've brought me dinner thinking I was just taking a nap. I get off bed and take a shower. I didn't bring any pyjamas, I slip my dress on and wear a beanie. I won't lie and say I look good, I'm a new mom, I only look good making milk bottles in the kitchen.

Now, I can't go inside his bedroom, can I? I stand outside his bedroom contemplating what to do, then I decide to knock.

It takes a moment before I hear his footsteps.

He opens the door, "Good morning."

"Morning, is Khaya here?" I ask.

"Yes, he's still asleep though. What time are you going to the police station?"

"After he's woken up," I say.

"You can leave him behind, let him have a drama free day." It's a new day but he's still going on about the things that happened yesterday.

"Okay, please let me know when he's awake," I turn and walk away.

I know he cares about Khaya and I, but nothing warranted me the yelling I received yesterday. I don't expect him to fill in Zothani's shoes, he shouldn't give himself that pressure of being my superman. I didn't choose to be born in my family, nobody chooses where they come from. Even when he still saw me as a gold-digger that was going to break his brother's heart, I don't think there was this much tension between us.

I turn and look back, he's looking at me.

I stop and hold his stare. Why are we really fighting?

He steps out and comes to me.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you last night," he finally sees the need to apologize.

“Thank you, I really didn’t need you to do that at that time.”

“I was frustrated and angry with myself. It breaks my heart to hear you crying, especially when you’re so far away from me. Sometimes I don’t even think you consider people who care about you if they’re not your blood family.”

“That’s not true, I consider you my family. Everything that’s happening to me right now was predicted by a strange woman, she told me I was going to collect the crumbs after my family has collapsed,” I say.

“Salo, you don’t have to. What about your peace?”

“Trust me, I’m going to be okay,” I say.

He opens his arms and hugs me. Everyone told me to be strong and honest with the police, this is the first hug I'm getting. I feel tiny and safe in his arms.

"I wish I can take all the pain away from you," he says above my head.

I hold on to his hug, he doesn't need to do anything above everything he's done for me and Khaya. I appreciate him.

"I've lost people who were very close to my heart. Death has hit repeatedly in my life. Yesterday I thought about everything I read on newspapers about fathers who killed their families when they got tired of life. I haven't been scared of losing anyone in a very long time. But yesterday was different,

I thought of every possible thing that could've happened to you and Khaya.”

He's a tough cookie, but there's a side of him that's soft as a marshmallow. That side is brought out by his kids, Nokwanda and Khaya.

“Your presence has helped me a lot, uyangithoba amanxeba, just being around you and having a general conversation with you. You're one person who keep my feet on the ground without even trying.

Whatever you go through, I go through it too. I care about you and Khaya a lot.”

I close my eyes and release a deep breath. He's still holding me, I'm comfortable.

“But I'm sorry for lashing out,” he says, his voice low.

I open my eyes and look at him, “I forgive you.”

He lets go of me, only when he turns his back on me I realize that we are not behaving like normal brother and sister, that’s how we refer to our relationship. I’m gripped by guilt for the long hug and deep talk we just had. I’m asking myself if we would have done that if Zothani was around. If his heart is still with him, how does he feel seeing us getting this close? I can be comforted by anyone, not his blood brother.

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NONDUMEZULU

Babo and Mam' Busi have always been the same. I was a fool to think one was better than the other. They both practiced witchcraft and cheated in their marriage. Mam' Busi tried to kill Aunt Teekay for sleeping with Babo, and now Babo has killed Bab' Shange for sleeping with his late wife. I hear he was caught this morning and he didn't deny anything. In all this I feel sorry for their children. They built their family and destroyed it and then left for Salo to collect the pieces. They were never grateful for anything, they always wanted more and more. It got to the point where they started turning against each other. They're both out of my life at last. I have a lot of good things happening in my life right

now. I'm celebrating my own wins, not their downfall.

I'm hosting friends for lunch, and by friends I mean Salo, Regina, and two of my colleagues whom I've gotten very close to, Welile and Bianca. They all don't know I accepted a proposal and the Mngunis will be home month end. I didn't get the ring, that's the reason, I had the most unromantic proposal ever. I'm hoping the girls will bring in the fun and hopefully cheer Salo up as well. She is an eye-witness in her own father's murder case, I can't imagine how much of a burden that is on her.

Salo is the first to arrive, she's driving her own car, Khaya is not with her.

"Is my employer your babysitter?" I ask.

"No, I have a nanny now," she says.

I think she was going to have great life even without her parents' intervention. She's a good person, you can't help but like her aura. We are closer than we were before, mostly now that we are both mothers.

"Thank God, now you're going back to Salo we know, I see a glow," I say.

She laughs, "I brought a box of chocolate, I didn't know what to buy."

"Chocolate is fine, I will hide it because Nkalipho preaches about healthy diet. Do you think I'm gaining weight?" I turn for her to see properly.

“Yes, but it looks good on you. It’s all going to the hips and butt...and the tummy,” she says.

**“Are you saying I now have a Jojo tank?”
I’m looking at myself, indeed my figure is gone without trace.**

“It’s not a Jojo tank yet, you need to buy a waist-trainer though,” she’s definitely saying my tummy is too big. But I will eat that box of chocolate, I will start eating healthy next year, this year has already been ruined.

It’s good she’s here, now I have extra helping hands as I set for lunch. Bianca is fussy with food, she’s always eating leaves at work. I know I have to know my story with her.

“That’s a lot of salad,” Salo says.

“There’s a herbivore coming,” I tell her.

She frowns, “Herbivore?”

“She doesn’t eat meat, only leaves.”

She bursts into laughter. “You’re supposed to be a role model, I always tell the young ones that in the family we have someone who has a degree. Stop embarrassing us, she’s a vegan, not herbivore.”

“Whatever, you should see her tiny waist. I swear if you twist her she’d break into two pieces.” I’m just envious that my figure is gone. I feel like people with tiny waists think they’re going to get a prize. By the way I’ve never seen a tiny-waisted grandmother, they all die young or get fat

like me. In fact I'm okay with it, I'm confident, I love my body.

“Hey, are you crying?” Salo.

I look up, “No.”

Fuck, I'm crying.

“What if he stops loving me? I think he's into women with tiny waists?”

“Who?” She frowns.

“Nkalipho, he proposed and I said yes.

What if he changes his mind the day before lobola negotiations?” I'm getting sad, I know there's nothing with gaining weight, but Nkalipho hates that I'm getting thick.

“Nkalipho loves you, he's not going to change his mind. Congratulations on your proposal by the way, how did it go? Did he

give you a ring?” She pulls the chair and sits.

I sit too, now I’m crying because he didn’t give me a ring, everyone is going to make fun of me.

“Okay, you’re getting me worried. Can we call him?” She takes my phone and gives me to unlock it. Then she scrolls to his number and calls him.

The call is on loudspeaker.

He answers; “Hey babe.”

“It’s Salo,” she says.

“Oh, hi, hello sisi.”

“Why are you killing her confidence? She’s growing up, her body is bound to change,

gaining weight is not the end of beauty,”
she’s standing up for me.

“I’m not following. I’ve never said anything
about her body, we’ve only talked about
her eating habits once,” he says.

Salo looks at me, frowning.

“So you didn’t tell her you’re into women
with tiny-waists?”

“No, I’ve never talked about waists,” he
says.

Well, he didn’t say it like that, but he told
me to eat healthy, that’s why I’m crying.

“Ask him if he still loves me,” I whisper to
Salo.

She gives me a disapproving look but goes
ahead and asks. “Do you still love her?”

“Yes, I love her,” he says.

I wipe my tears and smile.

“Okay, she’s smiling now, it’s all good,”

Salo says and drops the call.

Now I’m energetic, where were we setting the table? Oh, I need to fetch the serviettes.

“Are you pregnant?” Salo and her bad mouth.

“Really? Is that what you wish for me?”

She laughs, “Nondu, Mamdala is going to kill you. Oh my gosh, you’re pregnant.

Does he know?”

“Please stop, I’m not pregnant,” I’m about to start crying again.

“How do you know?” she asks.

I can't answer that question, how do I know anyway?

“Exactly, you're going to have another baby. Do you know how hard it is waking up and going to work while you're pregnant? Nkatha won't allow you to take a leave sooner, he's hard-headed.”

Okay, pause the pregnancy news a bit.

“Now he's hard-headed?”

“I've been telling him that we need to keep a distance.”

“That's stupid, you're co-parenting,” I say.

“Yes, and hugging, and going out to his dates together knowing very well that girls won't take it well, then when they walk out on him we sit together and eat while having

a good laugh. That's good co-parenting," she's frustrated by this.

I knew this was going to be a direction it takes. I'm just surprised it took her this long to want a distance. That's why I didn't entertain Dr Manzini's drunken crush, men will want to fuck you knowing very well that they are interested in other people. Imagine if I went on a date with him, I'd have to sit in front of Salo, getting played by them.

"You two are going straight to hell yazi," I tell her.

"That's fine, but let's not forget the most important topic, YOU ARE PREGNANT AND MAMDALA WILL EAT YOU ALIVE."

My smile disappears.

THE RING FIRE

SEASON FINALE

CHAPTER 84

SALO MHLONGO

I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. I have to stay away from Nkatha and that has everything to do with me. I was starting to get emotionally dependent, acting like a babymama who still has a babydaddy. I was calling him to report little things about Khaya, having him on the

phone while shushing Khaya to sleep and texting him in the mornings. It wasn't just me, both of us must've forgotten who we are to each other. I'm not a loose girl, however it's getting hard because at the end of the day I'm now alone in this world. I can't count on Sbonga and Sekhona because they're like my children now. I do need help, especially with Khaya.

I'm in bed with Zothani's picture, I'm wondering what his advice would be. Why doesn't he visit me through dreams? I long to hear his voice. Maybe he's angry at me for the way I've been carrying myself around his brother. His son looks exactly like him and Nkatha.

**“You would’ve been a great father,” I say
looking at his picture.**

**My first true love, my coach. I still ask
myself everyday why God did what he did?
He complicated my life. I put his picture on
the pillow in front of me and pull up the
blanket.**

Goodnight my love.

**God heard my cries, I can’t believe I’m
sitting here with him. He still looks the
same, he hasn’t changed one bit, I reach to
his hand and touch the scar on his wrist.**

“Was this from the accident?” I ask.

He starts by laughing. Same old him!

“I’ve always had this. What are you going to eat?”

“I will eat beef burger and chips,” I say and my order arrives immediately.

This is a very efficient service, I’m smiling as I bite my burger hungrily.

I look up and notice that there’s no food in front of him. He didn’t order anything?

“Are you not hungry?” I ask.

“I will eat when my brother gets here,” he says.

I nod and continue eating. He’s watching me with a smile stuck on his face.

I’m getting shy because I have messed my face with tomato sauce. I look around for a

serviette, there's none. He starts laughing, he still has that contagious loud laugh.

After he's had a good laugh he takes out a face towel and gives it to me.

I hear Khaya making baby noises and look up. There he's coming with Nkatha in a new pram. It still has a price tag, R3 800.

"Bhuti why did you buy him an expensive pram?"

He ignores me and sits opposite Zothani and I.

"You can call him Nkatha," Zothani says.

He's so silly, I can't call his brother by name.

"Say it," he nudges me with an elbow.

I'm hesitant but he's pushing me to say it.

“Nkatha why did you buy my son an expensive pram?” I ask.

“Because it’s my money, I can do anything I want for my son.” He’s what I thought he was; arrogant piece of...piece of the Zungus.

Zothani is laughing, he’s siding with his brother.

I’m angry, they’re both laughing, Khaya is playing and sounding happy in his new pram.

“Don’t mind her, she’s a drama queen,” Zothani says.

He kisses my cheek and goes to Nkatha and Khaya. My anger is not affecting their vibe. Zothani picks Khaya out of the pram and plays with him.

“I need to check my car,” he says.

The word car triggers me, I stand up wanting to follow him.

He looks at Nkatha, “Dokotela.”

One thing Nkatha hates is being referred to with his job title by family when he’s outside of work.

He curses at Zothani, Zothani laughs and walks away.

“Sit, I’m here,” Nkatha says.

Zothani’s laughter is still ringing in my ears, it changes my mind about following him. I sit with Nkatha and Khaya. I’m the only grumpy person here.

“Cheer up,” Nkatha says.

I roll my eyes and smile. But Zothani...

I look around, it's just me and Zothani's picture that I put in front of me before I slept. He was never here, we never sat and had any conversation. It was all just a dream but I can still hear his happy laughter.

I check the time, it's 4:55 in the morning. I don't remember waking up and feeding Khaya or changing his nappy. I look around, he's not in the room with me. My heart almost leaps out of my chest. I run out of the door in my short pyjamas.

I see Nkatha's back, he's standing in the kitchen, and I stop dead on my tracks. He's here?

He turns his head and sees me. I have a lot of questions, when did he get here?

“Hey,” he says, he’s making a bottle.

“Hi, when did you get here?” I know it’s his brother’s house and he has his own keys, but I feel intruded on.

“Last night, I wanted to be here when he turns 4 months old,” he says.

“Next month he will be turning 5 months old, it’s a monthly thing.” I’m trying to tell him it wasn’t necessary, it’s not like Khaya is turning 1 year old.

“I know,” he says turning back to what he was doing.

Even though it was a dream, I remember Zothani telling him that I’m a drama queen.

I walk in and asks if there's boiled water left in a kettle.

“You want tea?” he asks.

“Coffee, I had a long night,” I say.

“Okay, sit.” He grabs a cup and plugs the kettle again.

I don't know what the dream meant, I've created tension between him and I, it's hard for me to just share things. He makes my coffee and puts it in front of me.

Things are very awkward, I feel the need to explain myself.

“I wasn't trying to keep Khaya away from you,” I say.

He doesn't say anything, I know he's angry.

“I'm sorry,” I say.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine.”

I don’t take that as him accepting my apology.

“I dreamed of Zothani, he looked happy,” I tell him.

This gives me his full attention. “Did he say or do anything?”

“We were just chatting, it was you, Khaya, him, and I. He left saying he’s going to check his car, then I woke up hearing his loud laugh,” I say.

He exhales heavily and nods. “He’s laughing with the angels now.”

“Yeah,” I nod with a heavy heart.

“Was Khaya crying when you arrived?” I ask.

“Yes, I didn’t want to disturb you so I just took him to bed with me,” he says.

“Thank you.” I’m such a bad mother.

“You’re human, you’re allowed to be tired,” he says.

I look up, did he read my mind?

“I missed being with you guys,” he says.

I can see the sadness in his eyes, I’m such a selfish person, I really kept him away from Khaya because I’m scared I might drop my panties for him.

“You can come any time you want,” I say.

“If I come without your consent won’t you call me a hard-headed person to your sister?”

Fuck Nondu, did he really ran and told him what I said? I'm going to call her and ask how much bonus she got for running her little mouth.

"I have a date later," he says.

This is what we are not going to heaven for.

"I'm coming with you," I say.

He smiles, "Ewe, we are a package, buy one and get one free."

I wonder which slayqueen we are annoying later?

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I'm wearing pencil heels and a skinny jean, topped with a white overlapping shirt. I'm

feeling cute with a hat placed on top of my straight wig. I'm grateful for this opportunity, the last time I went out it was with him on his date with Lerato. I look good, uvukil' ugirl. Pity I can't dress Khaya the way I want yet, for him being warm is more important than style.

We are ready for his uncle's date.

He calls saying he's driving through the gate. Trust him to be on time or earlier than expected.

I take Khaya's bag and walk out.

He comes and gets Khaya and the bag. I waltz behind them, feeling Kardashianful.

We get in the car and head to Ballito.

He booked a table at a restaurant, this must be a girl he really likes.

We are served drinks and starters while we are waiting.

“How did you meet this one?” I ask.

“Through an old friend,” he says.

“Mmm, I can’t wait.” I’m feeling a bit of a devil coming out today. I’m not planning to be nice to the girl, whoever she is, couldn’t she find boyfriends in her neighborhood?

The waiter comes with a little blue-iced cake, there’s a ball toy on top of it.

“Please don’t tell me this is for Khaya,” I’m beyond shocked.

“It is,” he says like it’s normal.

Khaya is only turning 4 months old, he’s not going to eat a cake and he doesn’t care about today.

“You’re dramatic, seriously,” I say.

“It’s my money, I can do anything I want for my son.” I’ve heard these words before.

“Give him here,” he says.

I’m still gobsmacked. Do I dream of things that happen in real life now? I’m a sangoma, Gog’ Salo.

“Happy birthdate Manzini,” he says.

I laugh and shake my head.

Now they’re bringing the main course, his date is still nowhere to be seen.

“Is she even coming?” I ask him.

“Who?” He gathers his brows.

“Your date,” I say narrowing my eyebrow.

“He’s here,” he’s pointing at Khaya and smiling.

“This is his big day,” he says.

You know what, if you can’t beat them, join them.

“Happy birthdate to you! Happy birthdate to you!” I start singing for Khaya.

He’s taking a video, singing along. He’s such a crazy, exaggerating, and mostly a good father.

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The first thing I take off is the shoes. I almost died because of these pencil heels.

The wig follows, I have my bantu knots underneath.

“That was quick,” he says walking in.

“I did look good for good three hours, cut me some slack.”

“I didn’t say you look ugly now, this is your face that I mostly like, you’re beautiful in your skin and hair,” he says.

I embrace every little compliment, I’m not in my best body and skin yet.

“Thank you,” I smile.

“You’re welcome, let me put this man in bed.” He leaves with Khaya.

I lie on the couch thinking how happy I am, despite everything I’ve been through. I remember the words of my high school principal; “God doesn’t take if he’s not going to restore.”

He took what I called my source of happiness, and just when I was crying, he

sent someone who was going to make me happy differently, in his own strange way.

“Where’s your mind at?”

I didn’t see him coming, I lean back on the couch and sigh.

“Just thinking how I’m going to fall asleep with my aching feet,” I say.

“How old are you?” He sits with me.

“How is that relevant? They’re aching because I was wearing pencil heels trying to show off to your date,” I say.

He cracks up. “So all that glam wasn’t for Khaya and I, but a stranger?”

“It was your fault,” I say.

“Okay, let me make it better,” he pulls my feet to his lap.

I didn't expect a massage, he's pressing on my heel, it hits right on the spot.

I close my eyes and moan.

"Right there! Mmm, that feels so good." I haven't had a foot massage in decades.

He does both my feet, I'd pay him to do this everyday.

"You're good at this" I say moaning.

He's quiet, just focused on what he's doing.

I open my eyes to look at him. Was he staring at me the whole time?

What did I want to say to him? I can't remember, I'm locked into his stare.

I thought after dreaming about Zothani I wasn't going to feel this fear and

temptation. Maybe it's because he looks like Zothani. But if that was the case this would've happen right at the beginning. It's his character, he's different and he's so good to me.

"I'm fighting the same battle," he says.

Lately he has this skill of reading my mind.

"It's hard, I'm not sure I will win," he says.

"That's why I tried to keep a distance, it's wrong. Imagine what people would say."

"I care more about my happiness and yours. I can't hide that I want to be with you and Khaya all the time. One thing my brother always asked from me was to get to know you better. I was calling you names, he always laughed it off and said I will like

you once I get to know you. And he wasn't wrong, you're an amazing woman."

"He told me the same, I was always calling you arrogant, and he'd urge me to get to know you better," I say.

He laughs.

"And now I know you better, you're still arrogant," I say.

He laughs harder, he's not offended at all.

"Please continue massage me," I say.

"Only if you stop turning me on."

How did I turn him on though?

He pinches my heel, I close my eyes and moan.

He stops, I open my eyes and look at him.

“Do you want me to give you a real taste of what’s good?”

I laugh, “Please massage me, Dr Manzini.”

He pulls my leg inside of massaging. I slide to him laughing.

He grabs me up and pulls me close. It’s all happening too quick, before I know it I’m an inch close to his face, staring at his eyes.

I lean closer and kiss his lips. He kisses me back, wrapping his hand around my neck and deepening the kiss.

It’s been close to a year now, I haven’t had a man touching me like this. His breaths have escalated, he’s kissing me down my neck.

He unbuttons my jeans and lifts his eyes to look at me.

His eyes have softened, he's pushing my jeans down to my butt.

He caresses my mound underneath the lacy panty I'm wearing.

Our lips connect, we are kissing with passion again. I'm not feeling an ounce of guilt, I'm caught in the moment and happy.

His fingers are not on my clit directly but I'm still feeling the pleasure under the panties.

He puts his head over my shoulder and breathes on my skin. That and his fingers on my mound, he's pressed all the buttons. I lift my waist up, moaning his name.

"Let it out," he says in a rough voice.

My toes tremble, he rubs me harder, I let it out.

He's staring at me when I open my eyes. I was horny, I didn't care about him seeing my panties and giving me an orgasm. But now reality hits differently, I can't hold eye contact.

"Still arrogant, am I?" he asks, tapping his fingers on my now soaked panty.

I shake my head, covering my eyes with my hands.

He chuckles, he has me under his control now, he's happy.

THE RING FIRE

FINALE

CHAPTER 85

NONDUMEZULU

Today is not a big deal, everyone keeps saying. They're not coming here with the cows, they're only here to make promises, and there's no guarantee that they'd come back. I said I'll hire caterers, my mother said no. I said a tent, she said negotiations will be held in our small pathetic lounge. I said a DJ, she said it's not a celebration. So it's just a dull morning, Salo and Regina are here. We are cooking, there's no best cook among us, we are being helped by Aunt Teekay's verbal recipes.

The Mngunis should've been here before the sun came up. They're late and making me nervous. I can't imagine what the people would say if they don't show up.

I text him; WHERE ARE YOUR PEOPLE?

He doesn't respond. I swear if this guy stands my family up I will burn everything with a Mnguni name. I confirmed my pregnancy a few days ago, I haven't told him yet, I'm still trying to figure out how it happened and how my life is going to be now. Two kids, different fathers, and I'm not even 30 years old. My mother is going to be mad, this is one thing she asked me not to do. She even went as far as supporting my relationship with Nkalipho, she thought if she did things differently this

time and wasn't too hard on me, I wasn't going to make the same mistakes.

“Quiet!” Regina shushes everyone.

There's a voice yelling our clan names outside.

“They're here,” Salo exclaims.

They rush to the window and peeps outside.

I remain on the chair, holding a grater. I can't explain how I'm feeling. I've never been crazy about being someone's wife, but right now I realize that deep down in my heart I've always longed to be truly loved.

He sent elders from his family to come and tell elders in my family that he'd like to pay lobola for me. That's true love, I need to

text him and tell him they're here, in small letters.

“Nzuzo is running to the gate,” Salo says.

Hhayi-bo this child, he can't just open the gate for them.

“Oh my goodness, he's trying to open it,” Salo.

I peep through the window and see him fighting with the gate. There's a way they're supposed to be let in, they will pay some money first, they're late and nobody 'knows' who they are.

“Sally go and get that child,” Aunt Teekay says, rushing inside the kitchen.

Salo rushes out laughing.

“He’s giving them free access because they’re Mngunis, isile lengane,” Aunt Teekay says with her hands on the hips. Regina is laughing her ass off.

It’s time I allow Nzuzo to go and visit his grandmother’s home, he’s not normal. Salo comes back with him, I can’t even discipline him because wow, this child.

“Mkhulu wami is in the car,” he says, excitedly.

He always puts ownership labels to people. Mkhulu wami is his paternal grandfather, Mnguni.

“So you wanted them to just come in and take their bride because there’s your mkhulu outside?”

He looks at Aunt Teekay confused. He doesn't know what they're here for, he thinks they're just visiting.

"Is my baba going to come?" he asks me.

Everyone is staring at me, wanting to hear the answer I'm going to give him.

"No, he's at work," I say.

"I want airtime," he says.

That's him wanting to call his father on my big day.

"You will call him later. Do you want an apple?"

"Yes," he says, jumping up and down.

I give him the apple, he runs out of the kitchen.

I look at Salo, “This is what Khaya will do when you have a new boyfriend, he will want to call Nkatha.”

She laughs and turns her back to me, pretending to look for something in the fridge.

“I hope Nkatha will be understanding,” I say.

She clears her throat, “Are these Nzuzo’s viennas or the one we are using?”

“It’s Nzuzo’s, but we are going to use one packet,” I say.

Regina looks at me, eyes widen.

“Won’t he tell his father and then you will get famous for feeding abakhongi with his money?” she asks.

I swear this girl has been Solwazi's baby mama in the previous life. That's something he can do. I posted the ring emoji on my Whatsapp status to show that I've accepted a marriage proposal and everyone on my Whatsapp said their congratulations, even his wife Samantha. But he only viewed the status and he hasn't talked to me ever since.

"Don't worry, I will bribe Nzuzo, I can't be buying things we already have in the house. And besides he owes me, for 8 years I was taking care of the child alone," I say.

Salo takes them out, Aunt Teekay told us not to leave the baked beans and mayonnaise. It's her who's giving us the menu, it's screaming 1986. Curry and rice

and several salads with mayonnaise, and beetroot.

Speaking of the head chef, she walks in.

“Who’s making the kentucky?”

We look at each other, the last time I ate a full plate with fried chicken thigh on the side was 2003.

“We are cooking chicken curry and frying chicken as well?” Salo is brave enough to ask.

“Yes...and the dessert. I made the jelly yesterday, it has set now. Put peaches and custard in it ,” she says and walks out.

Regina bursts into laughter.

“This is Christmas,” she says.

“Year 2003,” I add.

It's just the three of us in the kitchen, we need to be faster or else my in-laws will die of hunger.

My phone rings, I answer ecstatically.

"Hubby," I say.

"Sawubona MaMhlongo."

I get off the chair wearing only one shoe and go to the bathroom. I can't talk with those ears listening. I close the toilet seat lid and sit.

"How's everything going?" he asks.

"They've been let in, your father drove off, I think he's going to wait for them somewhere. Why didn't you make him a part of the delegate?"

“Because he’s your father-in-law,” he says.

I have a father-in-law? I’m getting very important in life.

“Who is discussing on your behalf since your uncle is locked up?”

Even if he wasn’t, I wasn’t going to allow Babo to hold my negotiations.

“You know the old Mhlongo grandfather? He’s here with his two eldest sons and then my mother’s cousin,” I say.

“I hope they’re not hard on my people. But I will pay whatever they want, even full 11 cows,” he says.

“It’s going to be 8 cows, I’m used goods,” I say what the society says.

I'm a second hand, my value has decreased, hence the decrease in the lobola amount.

"If anyone says that to you let me know," he says.

"Nkalipho, no violence," I say, laughing.

"No, I'm serious, if someone calls you used goods let me know." He's serious about this.

Telling him would be like signing a death warrant for that person.

"I have something to tell you," I say.

"Okay, what is it?" he asks.

Salo is yelling my name from the kitchen.

I have to get off the phone before she comes and drags me out.

“I will tell you later,” I tell Nkalipho.

“Oh, so you’re coming to my house later?”

“No, you will come around.”

“Okay, I love you.”

I don’t know why I’m not mad at him. A part of me believes he never respected my “no kids for 2 years rule’, he frequently slept with me without a condom. I allowed him to, even at times when I wasn’t consistent with my birth-control. I can’t really put all the blame on him, I was supposed to be more responsible.

I walk back to the kitchen. Okay, why is MaNsele here? This is the oldest woman in the township. She no longer attends gatherings because of her knees. Even

when she goes to town to collect her pension her grandson comes from Durban with his car to take her there. They're all gathered in the kitchen for tea. This was definitely Aunt Teekay's idea, she wants to keep a close eye on the dishes we are cooking.

"Gogo how did you get here?" I ask MaNsele.

Every young person calls her gogo in the township.

"I walked, I had to come and see for myself," she says.

"See what?" my mother asks.

"Your daughter being asked for a hand in marriage. It's true that people grow up and change their ways," she says.

I know where this is going.

“And what do you mean by that?” Aunt Teekay.

She’s going to catch the Nkosi smoke if she’s not careful.

“Isn’t she fell pregnant and didn’t know the father?” She lifts her wrinkled eyes to me. All her peers are dead and talking through dreams to their grandchildren. But no, not her, she’s a living ancestor.

“At least this time the father is marrying her,” she says.

“The father?” my mother and Aunt Teekay look at me.

I look at Salo, she’s the only one who knows. Why the fuck is MaNsele here?

“MaNkosi don’t tell me you’re not seeing it. Even with the first one MaKhumalo had to stop you on your way to church and tell you,” she says, the bloody witch.

I can’t look at my mother, I thought I’d have time to properly break the news to her.

“Follow me,” she stands up.

I’m in deep shit!

“Yes, follow us,” Aunt Teekay stands too.

Her cheerleader, I’m in deeper shit.

I don’t know why Salo is laughing, she’s running away from Dr Manzini’s dick.

I stand against the wall, they’re both sitting on the bed.

“Lift your T-shirt,” my mother instructs.

I’m not a teenager, I’m a grown working woman.

“I’m pregnant Ma, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for it to happen,” I say.

Aunt Teekay claps her hands. That’s it, she’s here to add fuel to the fire.

“You’re working, it hasn’t been long since you started. Nzuzo is also still a child. Don’t you want your womb to rest like other young girls?” my mother asks.

“Nkalipho said he will hire a full-time nanny,” I’m lying, he didn’t say that.

“Do you know what your father said to me? He said you were going to study in white people’s schools and wear expensive nappies. Men say anything to get what they

want, I'm disappointed you still don't know anything about life," she says.

"You think he will run away too?" I know Nkalipho better than them, but I've been hurt so my head is fertile for seeds of doubt.

"What? No, no, he's not going to run away," that's Aunt Teekay.

"But what if he does?" I'm getting teary. The possibility of going through what Solwazi put me through scares me.

"No, listen baby, you see that boy with crossed eyes, he's a keeper," Aunt Teekay is always saying weirdest things about people, I'm laughing through tears. "He loves kids, didn't he step up for Nzuzo before your relationship even sailed?"

“But people can love other people’s kids and hate theirs, like Solwazi,” I say.

“Solwazi didn’t have a proper family structure growing up, he’s not like Nkalipho,” my mother says. I’m getting confused, they’re cold and warm.

“Nkalipho is not going to leave you, he loves you. But you’re still a disappointment, couldn’t you wait until he weds you? Hhayi Nomdumezulu niyayithanda ilabor ward, every now and then you want to be cut by scissors.” She stands up.

Her sister stands too, “Is he happy?”

“I haven’t told him yet,” I say.

They look at each other.

“So the full-time nanny?” Aunt Teekay asks.

I keep quiet, I was caught really quick.

They laugh and walk out. Mxm, Nkalipho will hire a nanny for me anyway, I will ask him.

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The negotiations went well, the Mngunis came prepared. And we didn't have a family fighting over the money, my mother was given everything. My pregnancy news have traveled, I'm getting questions from people I hardly interact with on the street. Nkalipho is parked two houses away.

Nzuzo insisted on coming with me, he thinks we are going to see Sphiwe.

Nkalipho steps out of the car and stands outside. He looks happy, he's smiling as we get closer.

Nzuzo runs to his arms. This one will always steal my moments, I'm the one who should've ran to those arms.

"Mommy is a bride," he says.

I knew he'd sing like a bird, he's quoting Aunt Teekay with the bride thing.

"Whose bride?" Nkalipho asks.

"Mkhulu wami's bride," he says boldly.

I laugh so hard, I even forget that I'm about to have two kids with different fathers and Nzuzo's SASSA grant hasn't reported in two

months. I hope they didn't discover that Solwazi is his father.

We get inside the car, Nkalipho distracts Nzuzo with a tablet. He sits at the back and plays games.

“My love,” he says.

“Babe,” I smile.

We kiss, this is the happiest day of our lives.

I ask, “Are you going to hire a full-time nanny for me?”

“Yes,” he says.

Okay...??

“Are you sure?”

He nods, "I'm going to do everything for you not to be disturbed from your goals."

"So you know that I'm pregnant?" Gosh, I'm fuming.

"Ummm...yes," he says, shifting on his seat.

"Fuck you! How can you do this to me? You knew very well that I wanted to have a child after I've accomplished certain things at home." He has a big head and he's very selfish.

"Mommy don't curse," says a little voice from the back.

I turn and look at him. He confidently holds my stare, I'm being disciplined here.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to curse," I say.

Nkalipho smiles, he's happy he has Nzuzo's support.

"Are you angry because I got you pregnant or because I already knew and you didn't have a chance to break the news to me?" he asks.

"Both. I hate you man," I say.

"Show me how much," he says.

I frown, is he stupid?

I raise my hand to hit him, he calls Nzuzo.

I drop my hand and give him an evil eye.

"I love you," he says.

I roll my eyes and not respond.

"You and Nzuzo and Baby Two Years," he says.

What the fuck!

“You can’t name him or her Baby Two Years!” I don’t know this soul yet but I will defend it from stupid names. Is he that uncreative?

He’s laughing, “Okay, Mama kaTwo Years.”

Pity I can’t do anything because of his bodyguard at the back.

Am I happy? Yes.

I’m grateful for everything that happened and didn’t happen. I’m stronger and wiser and happier than I’ve ever been. My gratitude extends even to my enemies, one six feet under the ground and one behind bars.

A hoot.

Isn’t that my boss’ car?

“That’s Dr Manzini’s car, Salo doesn’t know he’s here,” I exclaim, looking outside the window.

Nkalipho chuckles, “He’s obsessed.”

I look at him, does he know?

“They kissed and...” I’m trying to give him the scoop.

He stops me, “Izindaba zabantu Mama kaTwo Years!”

Wow, so I’m stuck with this boring person for life.

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AUNT TEEKAY

Khulekani fetches her earlier, this is not the time they agreed on. She has to say goodbye to her family, everyone has accepted that she jumps everytime her boyfriend appears. She's new to the love department, they understand.

She walks out with her bag, the day went well, soon she will be attending her niece's wedding. She's happy, finally her sister has found peace. Khulekani climbs out of the quantum and opens the door for her. Why is he not opening the front door?

He kisses her lips and explains, "I have a little passenger that I need you to look after."

She looks inside and frowns. There's a baby on the seat.

“Whose baby is this?” she asks, glaring at him.

“A client’s accident baby,” he says with a low sigh.

No, he has to try a better explanation.

“Khulekani whose baby is this?” She loves babies, but not the ones she doesn’t know.

“Long story short, a young man by the name of Sphakamiso Mcineka had one of the girls pregnant. He didn’t know until last week, there was no place for the baby anymore so I had to look for him. He’s meeting up with me in Total garage to take his baby,” he says.

“Are you serious? Don’t prostitutes tie their tubes or something?”

“Mistakes happen,” Khulekani says.

“Is he going to love the baby he had with the prostitute? What if he has a wife or girlfriend at home?” she asks.

“I don’t know, I don’t care, my job is to make sure the business goes smoothly, without disturbances and babies around,” he says.

What a life! So his job goes as far as uniting fathers with their accident children.

She climbs in and takes the baby. It’s an innocent little boy, he’s asleep.

Men are always up to some bullshit. Who sleeps with a prostitute without protection?

THE END!