

DISCOVERING REAL LOVE
SEASON ONE



I am Ntombikayise Poti. A twenty-three-year-old rural girl. Daughter to the late Nobandla Poti and Mziwakhe Poti. My mother died when I was just 5 years old. My father remarried a woman by the name of Nomvula Fakude who proved to only have love for the children that she gave birth to. If I did not know any better I would have thought the story of Cinderella was a prophecy of my life, only an African version of it. I have two siblings who are my father's children from his second wife. A brother and sister, Nolwazi and Lwazi Poti

who are twins and are now 15 years old. I have always been envious of them because they got all the love and affection of a mother that I was robbed off. My father worked far from home in a mine and only came home once a year during the December holiday. It gave his wife plenty of time to treat me like dirt. I love my father and I know that he loves me too, but I could never bring myself to tell him about the way his wife treated me because I feared that he would strip me off his love. For some reason he also isolated me from my mother's

family after getting married to Nomvula. To such an extent that we moved from the village we lived in to another unknown to my mother's family. For that I am angry at him about because he does not have an extended family. He never talked about the reasons behind him being all alone when other people have extended family. I suspect they all died or that he was disowned by them. I moved from my village because I met a man, Bonga Vimbi (30 years old) five years ago who promised me everything under the sun. a man who promised to take

me to university so that I could make something of my life. A man that was 7 years my senior. The naive me fell head over heels in love with this man. It was easy for him to convince the then 18 year old me, who had for years lived under the cruelty of a step mother to move away from home. I remember telling him that I would think about it and that same night when I got home, my step mother threw lukewarm oil on me for not cooking on time. It was then that I realized that if I did not get out of there she would kill me, bury me in the

backyard and tell my father that I had ran away. So I did myself a favour by running away with the man who loved me, who wants to see me succeed and marry me. I did not even take clothes because my knight in shining armour promised me an entire wardrobe of clothes. All I took was my Matric Certificate, ID and a pictures of my mother and father. I left while my dad was away at work, meaning I did not get a chance to say goodbye nor get his blessings, there was imply no time because if my step mother found out that I was

going to live the good life, in a big city she would have convinced him to forbid me from going. It still haunts me that I left home like that, like a thief in the night.

Bonga and I had been dating for a month when I decided to place my entire future in his hands. We moved to Cape Town and I was so excited. Excited to get away from abuse, to finally see what a city looks like, to go to university and start a new life. Little did I know that I was putting my life in the hands of someone who would crush it.

ONE

Ntombi

"Abusive relationships are like a bad drug, you know it is bad for you but you have a really hard time escaping from it", read the magazine that I held in my hands. I had never read something more true. It further gave advice on how a woman in an abusive relationship could free herself. It is so easy for those who have never been in one to say "leave him" when they do not know the complete story. The thing about being in an abusive relationship is that it requires

you to lose your friend, your family, your dreams, your dignity and so much more. My abuser played his cards right. He made sure that I do not have anyone but him to lean on. When we arrived in Cape Town we lived in a worn out shack, the opposite of what Bonga promised. That should have been the first thing that made me head back to my father's house but between his smooth explanation and the fear of going back home I did not go back. He showed me around but not so much because he said it was too dangerous. The skwatta

camp life was a different life to that I saw in books about Cape town. I decided to stop wanting more because I had a man who put food on the table and was kind to me. I kept on nagging Bonga about university applications and he kept on having excuses, another red flag that I ignored. Bonga took me out to town for the very first time about six months after moving in with him. I finally got to see the Cape Town that I saw in pictures, it was so beautiful. I did not ask him why he decided to finally allow me to

come with him to town because it was apparently dangerous, but he just said it was because he loves. Those words were enough to make me stop asking questions and enjoy the day. When we went back home, we were greeted by a devastating, our shack had burnt down. All my important documents that I needed to apply at university were gone. When I asked him what we would do, he said I should not worry, that he got us an RDP house to live in. It was as though he had prepared for the fire. I did not care about the shack, only my papers. Bonga

told me that it would take thousand of rands to get new ones so I needed to wait until he had saved up enough money to pay for it. I was patient and understanding. It has been five years and still nothing. My prince charming also turned into a monster about three years ago. I was sitting and reading the magazine when I heard the door creek, he was home and my mood went from neutral to completely down. I no longer enjoy this relationship. I love him but he is not the man I thought he was. It first started with forbidding

me from going to visit neighbors, then he started hurting me with his words and then the beating started. I've been thinking about my life and I've concluded that I am meant to be abused. I snapped out of my sad thoughts when I felt the megazine hit my face hard. I looked up to face him and he had a look of disgust on his face.

Bonga: "Why haven't you cooked anything?", he said while pointing at the kitchen.

Ntombi: "I'm on my periods, Bonga and you know that my period pain are ten times worse

since...since..." He aggressively pulled me up from the couch before I could finish. I looked into his eyes and I saw pure hatred in them. He hated it when I talked about the reason why my period pains are unbearable because he knew that he was to blame for it. I waited for him to do whatever with me because it seems to boost his twisted ego.

Bonga: "You had better go into that damn kitchen and cook me some food before it's your face that lands on a hot plate. If I'm not eating in an hour, you will see flames, literally", he said while

tightening his grip around my arm. Me: "Dinner will be ready soon", I managed to say in a low tone. Bonga: "Aren't you forgetting anything?"

Me: "I'm sorry for disrespecting you by not cooking in time, Bonga", I said still looking into his dark eyes. He let go of my arm by pushing me towards the door. I flew into it and had to use my hands to hold on to the frame or my face would have surely kissed the door and not in a good way. I was in real pain, but to avoid conflict I had to do as told. We have plenty of leftovers that I

have frozen but he won't eat it. I took out the pots and the ingredients I'll need and started cooking. He came into the kitchen and took out a beer in the fridge. I hated the smell of it, in fact I hated the smell of Bonga. It was a mixture of tobacco, sweat and beer. He was no longer that good looking man that I knew, he had grown a potbelly which made him look like a frog because he was now a slender man with a big beer belly. Perhaps he was always ugly but the love I had for him blinded me. I became nervous every time he was too close to me because I

never knew what to expect. What I'm grateful for is the fact that he stopped having sexual desires for me, he prefers to buy from escorts. I can't imagine him touching me now. I'm sure I'd bath over and over again and even that would not be enough. I also think sex is overrated. I've only had it with him and not once did I enjoy it, not even when I was madly in love with him. I continued to cook when I heard a soft knock on the door. He rushed to open because he fears that if I get too close to anyone in our neighborhood I'd talk about the

hell behind our closed door. He opened and Sindi, our neighbors came in.

Sindi: Good evening, love birds. I hope I don't disturb your cooking. Ntombi, I brought you these. It's the University booklets you asked for. I got one from UCT, UWC, CPUT and I'll get more soon. I wish you all the best with your application.

Bonga: Thank you, Sindi. I will have been trying to get her to go to university because I'm willing to give her everything she needs. This time I'll apply for her myself" Sindi: "Hold on to him, sisi.

A man who supports your dreams is a keeper. Let me go, I also left pots on the stove", she said while laughing.

Bonga: "I'll also encourage her to visit you. This one loves locking herself in this house", he said jokingly and Sindi laughed. If only she knew that I get threatened to stay indoors. He even buys our groceries himself. I no longer get cash. I thanked Sindi and said goodbye and left. Bonga didn't even wait for her to reach the gate when I felt a the back of his hand land on my cheek. I met the floor with such ease because

I have gotten thin, I no longer have a curvy hour glass figure. I laid on the floor blinking my tears away trying not to show weakness. Bonga: "You are slow for a girl who claims to have been an A student. I burnt that damn shack down on purpose. You think you can go to school with my money and then think you're better than me by marrying some lawyer after I made you something. You will remain the nothing you were when I found you. I'm not going to pay for you to get replacement documents. Me: And you will forever remain a

coward. Only a coward does what you do. You hit on defenceless women, you are afraid to have an educated woman by your side because you know the real nothing here is you", I said while sobbing. I did not get to say much more because he was on top of me before I knew it. He was dishing out fists on my fragile body like never before. He has hit me before, but never like this. This time he hit me until my body got numb. My vision became blurry. I thought I was going blind. He finally stopped when he realized that I'm no longer responding. I

then passed out. I woke to the feeling of a finger brushing my hand. I could not even move it because I knew it was Bonga's. My entire body was sore, literally all of me was in pain but the pain outside did not compare to that which I felt inside. My step mom hit me but never to this point. I should have stayed home, clearly Nomvula was a better devil. I opened my eyes and got greeted with the sight of Bonga crying, his eyes were red. Sindi went to stand behind him.

Sindi: "Ntombi, how are you feeling? I can't believe that

those nyaope boys did this to you in your own yard", she said in concern. Me: "Nya..."

Bonga: "Yes, baby. You were going to take our clothes off the line. I got woken up by your cries because I must have passed out due to exhaustion. When I came out you were filled with blood and two boy ran out of the yard into the bush in front of the house", he sobbed.

Sindi: He was in such a state shame. The people could not find those bastards who did this. We will though and they will be sorry. I'm just glad you're alive. Had

Bonga not not woken up and come out we would be saying something else. You have a man, Ntombi yho", she praised Bonga. Me: "Where did you find me?", I asked because I remember what really happened. I looked at him and he pretended to be sobbing too much to even speak.

Sindi: "Bonga found you by the washing line. They took your phone and grocery money that was in your pocket. He tried to fight off those boys but they ran away. He then called out for help. The clothes on the line were scattered and some filled with

blood. We quickly called an ambulance. You've been out since yesterday", said Bonga's newly self appointed spokeswoman, while the "pained" boyfriend wept crocodile tears. I can't believe that this man took me out back to our washing line, took some clean clothes, made sure some had my blood on it and then played the caring boyfriend. If only Sindi and other people knew that they were helping the suspect get me to hospital. I'm even afraid that some innocent drug addicted boys might be blamed. In our neighborhood they necklace some

allegedly thugs or beat them up. Somewhere someone's child might get killed because my coward of a man can't take blame. Me: "You're getting better at coming up with excuses for your deeds. I have to admit this one tops it all", I said while laughing in disbelief causing my ribs to feel more pain.

Bonga: "Listen, bitch. One word about the truth to Sindiswa or anyone and I'll do far worse than this. I said I'm sorry, now get over it and when the doctor comes say you want to be discharged", he said in a low hissing tone while pointing his dirty finger at me.

Truth is I am scared. I'm scared of telling people the truth just like I was when Nomvula hit me. They always threatened that the next beating will be worse and I feared that. I want to talk but I can't. I'm not brave enough and I've got nowhere to run to. The doctor came in and said there are no internal injuries, only a fractured rib which will heal. I told him I'd like to get discharged but he did not have non of that. I could see the anger in Bonga's face. The police also came for a statement. I confirmed Bonga's story. They

wanted me to describe the boys but I said I didn't get a chance to look at their faces as it all happened so fast. I was not about to describe a person who really exists and have them be victims of mob justice. They might be addicts but those boys have always treated me with respect. I could see that the female cop didn't believe me. I'm sure my eyes were crying out for help. It's said that the eyes are the window to the soul after all and my soul was filled with darkness and pain. ❤️

TWO

NTOMBI

I have been in hospital for a week now and Bonga had been nothing but an angel. Maybe he could see that he had gone too far this time. It is almost as though he had returned to his old self, the man that I fell in love with five years ago. He was getting praises from the hospital staff down to complete strangers, but he has always been good at showing the public a kind heart. My bedside table was filled with flowers from him and sweet treats from Sindi. If I

was not a prisoner, I would have been friends with Sindi. She seemed like a nice young girl and is about to start her first year. Hearing her speak about all she will do at university hurt me, not in a jealous way but in a way that reminded me that I might never get to that point. A beautiful young doctor was assisting my doctor, I am guessing that she is doing her internship. She smiled when she saw me.

Dr Zim: "You are looking good. The swelling on your face has gone down, your open wounds are closing and you do not feel as much pain

when we press your ribs. Dr Jones and I are very happy and I sure you will be happy to hear that you are going home", she said and even did a happy dance. I could not help but smile, suddenly her happiness rubbed off on me

Me: "Thank Dr Zimkhitha. I'm still in pain, so if you still want to keep me here I'll understand", I tried my luck because I didn't want to go back home.

Dr Zim: "I've never heard anyone say the doctor can prolong their stay at a hospital. Do not worry, you are good enough to go heal at home and this is a state hospital,

meaning this bed should be offered to someone who needs it more"

Me: "I understand. Hold on are you if you don't mind me asking".

Dr Zim: "I'm 26", she said with a smile. She is only three years older than me, yet she is a doctor.

Me: "I lost my ID and Matric certificate to a shack fire. I'm wondering how much it will cost to replace both?. I would love to go back to school but I can not apply without those documents", I asked her because after Bonga admitted to starting a fire that

not only destroyed my documents but also the shacks of twenty more families I no longer believe him.

Dr Zim: "I'm so glad to hear a young black woman wanting to go to school, I'm already proud of you, Ntombi. Well there is a fee you have to pay to get both", she said while examining my rib area.

Me: "I have been trying to save but I could not get thousand of rands to..."

Dr Zim: "What?! Who on earth told you it costs that much? It is only a few rands. I estimate the

cost for a new matric certificate to be about R105 and for an ID about R140. The nice thing is that you can go to Home Affairs and get a temporary ID for about R80. It will help you apply for a new certificate while you are waiting for your new ID", she said with such patience. I was shocked that the costs do not even amount to R500. I guess I'm not as smart as I thought. I believed that bastard for years. I felt like a dumb bum. I am sure Dr Zim thought so too. Me: "Let's say that I have the money. What is the process?"

DR Zim: "Go to the nearest police station. Ask to have a affidavit written to you. In it you will tell what happened to your documents. Once you get that, you go to home affairs with your R80 for the temporary ID and the R140 for the actual one. You should get the temporary one immediately, go make copies of it, then go back to the police station to have a copy certified. Now with that copy and your R105, you can go apply for a new certificate. It can be done online now. You will send the money to their bank. Once you have done that send the

certified copy of your temporary and the proof of payment to the email address given on their website. I can help you get their banking details and email.", she said with a smile. I have never heard anyone explain something to me with such care and patience in their voice.

Me: "Thank you so much, DR. I have clearly been misled by my neighbour when he said it would cost me thousand. I was a fool for believing it too", I said and faked a laugh.

DR Zim: "No one knows everything. You at least are

smart enough to ask what you do not know. I am happy to help a another young woman take control of her future", she said with a smile.

Me: "Thank you so much. Uhmm please do not tell my boyfriend. I want to surprise him when I have all the new documents.", I said with a fake smile on my face. If Bonga knew about this conversation, he would kill me for thinking I am smarter then him, no one can be smarter than the great Bonga. He even disagreed with doctors on occasion on what was good for me.

DR Zim: "It stays our little secret", she said while "zipping" her lips. "What does he do, your man", she asked with curiosity. If only she knew that I do not know the answer. After he left his factory job, I do not know how he makes his money.

Me: "He is a security guard at a steel factory", I lied and hated myself for it because she has helped me so much.

Dr Zim: "I'm guessing you stay at home?", she asked and I nodded. "Any kids?", she asked a bit more. I shook my head. She let out a sigh of relief.

Me: "You seem pleased with the second answer"

Dr Zim: "I'm sorry to make it obvious but I really am. You are not working, your boyfriend I presume does not get much. Go get your education, find work or start a business, perhaps encourage him to go to school too for better job opportunities. Once you have achieved that, get married and then have kids. I know life does not always go according to order, but try not to get distracted. You seem like a woman with a good head on her shoulders. I want you to get out

of the drug manifested shack life that caused you to have a fractured rib and find a better place for yourself. Never and I mean never depend on a man. I am sure there are reasons for you depending on him now, but do not let it be a permanent things", she advised. Why was she not my older sister?

Me: "I don't want to depend on him forever either. Thank you so much for showing me kindness, DR Zim.

Dr Zim: "I'm a women's woman. To other women win, is a win to me as well. Well, girl since you are

a home executive", I laughed at how well she described me being a good for nothing. "What?! It is what women who man the house are called. Some underestimate the role, but I can not even boil water so I respect women like yourself", I laughed even more which caused pain in my injured rib.

Me: "You can not boil water?", she laughed and covered her face with her hands.

DR Zim: "I tried to cook pap for my boyfriend and I burnt the water. Poor guy had to cook

himself", we both laughed so much.

Me: "If you need any lessons, I am available", I joked.

DR Zim: "Oh my goodness, I have just had a good idea. I can't cook and I want to know how, especially the traditional Xhosa dishes since my boyfriend is from rural Eastern Cape, so should we get married I don't want to make an ass of myself when I have to do makoti duties. Here is the offer, Miss Poti. You teach me how to cook on my off days and I pay you, that way you can raise the money for your documents and

for the application and registration for your university journey. What do you say?", she asked with enthusiasm.

Me: "Ummm...", Bonga walked in before I could think about an excuse to give to the good doctor. He came with a fresh bunch of flowers and kissed my forehead. To the outside world we were a happy young couple in love with each other. Zimkitha excused herself and left us alone. At least he could not do anything because I'm sharing a ward with five others. Dr Zim picked through the blue curtain which gave me

privacy to tell us she is about to sign my discharge forms and disappeared again. Bonga was so excited. I thought he would whisper hurtful things to me but he was sweet, too sweet actually. He asked how I was feeling. I made my injuries sound worse than they were. He apologized and I do not even know if it was sincere. The nurse helped me to the bathroom to bath. I put on the clothes Bonga brought after I was done. We walked to the reception area. It could not keep up with him. Dr Zim told him to wait for me in the car, that she

would try to get a wheelchair for me and push me out herself. He listened and went out. I guess he knew that I would not speak the truth. The wheelchair came, DR Zim gave me another packet of pills. "This could be the remedy for a healthier and brighter future", she said while putting the pills in my hand. I did not understand what she meant, but I thanked her for everything. She had to go help a senior doctor so she asked a hospital porter to push me out. I looked at the white plastic pack and realized it was not pills, but small papers. I

took it out quickly to look at it. It was print outs of the process I should follow to get my documents and also her business card. I flipped the card and at the back read "YOU CAN DO IT!!!". I smiled, put the papers back in the packet and put it in my bra. Her offer was a great one but I could not accept it. Bonga comes home at the most random moments at times and if he someday found me gone when he returns, all hell would break loose. Bonga stopped us and came running towards us. He told the porter that he would push me to the car and bring the

wheelchair back. He did not have a car, so I'm guessing that he borrowed it from a friend of his, one of those good for nothing friends. We got into the car and drove home to our four room RDP house. I was so excited about the possibility of me getting a new ID and Certificate, but the way to go about getting them was so risky. We got home and expected him to bring out the monster that he is, but he did not. He put me on the couch and offered to make me tea. He came with it and put it beside me and knelt in front of me.

Bonga: "Love, I'm sorry for hurting you to a point where you had to go to hospital", he said while planting kisses on my hands.

Me: "It is not the first time you hurt me to a point where I had to seek medical help. The first time was when you kicked my abdomen so much that it caused a tear in my womb and because of that I will never be able to carry children to full term, yes you have gone way to far this time, Bonga. You are no better than the devil I ran away from back at home"

Bonga: "Well about the womb, there are other options. We get

another woman to carry our babies. I first have to save because it is not cheap but my focus now is saving for your ID and Certificate again. I'm sorry for burning them in the first place. I just feared that you would leave me for an educated man when you are educated. I've gotten R2000 so far, soon I will have enough.

Me: "You think I'm a foo...", I cut myself short before I could finish speaking. "You make a fool of me because you will use that money. I cannot live like this, Bonga.

Rather give me that money so I could go back home"

Bonga: "I will change, Ntombi. I will go seek help to help me with my anger. This pain of being an orphan is too much and I am still angry at my father for killing my mother and then himself. I will go get help. Please do not leave me", he said while burying his face in my legs and wept.

Me: "This is the last chance, Bonga. I will not wait for you to do to me what your father did your mother.

Bonga: "Never!, I'm not that monster. I love you too much to kill you. I'm sick, Ntombi and I need you to help me heal. You are my only hope. Please don't leave, baby. I'll try my best to change.", he said sincerely and a part of me believed him.

To think that I almost told him I know about the real prices of the documents. I accept his apology partly, I will accept it fully once he tells me the truth and then give me the money to go do what I I want. He kissed me with his tobacco breath. It made me want to throw up. How did I

tolerate it all these years? His hands were all over my body for the first time after a very long time. The thought of him having sex with me disgusted me even more. The thought of sex with anyone was not appealing actually. I pretend like I was in a lot of pain. I feared that he would force himself on me. It has never happened but I have read stories about women being raped by their partners. He stopped and said he is going to buy some fish and chips around the corner. Should I be glad that he is at least not a rapist? I took his tea and pored

it in the pot plant on top of our coffee table. His apology sounded sincere, but it does not mean that I can trust him again. He really did have a tough upbringing. To live with the pain of knowing your mother died because of your dad is enough to traumatise any child. I can not leave him now that he is willing to seek help. Maybe he will be the well put together Bonga he was before the drinking, smoking, cheating and abuse. We are both from broken homes and so that makes us both be broken beings. Can two broken people heal each other? So far it seems

more damage rather than healing has been done. Perhaps him seeking help is the first step healing from his past traumas and healing our relationship. ❤️

Three

Ntombi

It has been a month since that terrible ordeal. My body has healed about 90% now and I can finally do chores around the house to keep myself busy. There is peace at home since, and I think that things are beginning to go

back to normal. Bonga attends a support group for men who abused/abuse their partners. Men who regret ever laying a hand on their ladies. I must say there is a lot of change in his behaviour since he started going to their meetings. He has his moments of becoming angry, but instead of hitting me like he did before, he goes out to cool off and return when he is good again. He has also tried to get me to be intimate with him a few times, but I do not want to. I no longer have such desires for him. We sleep in the same bed and the lack

of intimacy has not bothered either of us. I don't want to be touched in the name of love by the same hands that beat me and he did not want to sleep with someone with no rhythm in bed. It was a win-win situation. I have been coming up with excuses every time he tried his luck. I thought that now would be a good time to tell him that I knew about the cost of getting me new replacement documents. He came out of the room already dressed to go to work.

Me: "Bonga", he turned turned to face me.

Bonga: "My Everything", he said with a smile and kissed me.

Me: "The prices for an ID and Matric Certificate have lowered since the last time you saw it", I said in a whisper. He clenched his jaw and I knew I had pressed a button.

Bonga: "And a know nothing like you knows that how?", he said in an agitated tone of voice.

Me: "Will it did not take much for the name calling to start", I mumbled to myself.

Bonga: "What?", he said while holding his ear.

Me: "I saw a newspaper article in one of the newspaper I was using to wipe the windows. The total is less then R500, instead of the old price of thousand of rands". He looked at me for a while without saying a word. I thought he could smell my lies.

Bonga: "Well I do not even have R100 on my name. I can not borrow money because I am already in deep debt. You will have to wait to wait until I am sorted. Between rent, food, transport and debts I have nothing ;left of my pay", he said while taking out the inside of his pockets.

Me: "I could always go and look for a cleaning job. Usually they do not want ID and Matric copies for those.", I said with slight excitement because I already had a way to raise the money.

Bonga: "I said I will give it to you. Just wait a while longer"

Me: "Okay", I said pretending to believe his lies.

Sindi: "Chomee!", she shouted from outside before she appeared on our door.

Me: "Hello, Sindiswa", I said with a smile.

Bonga: "Sindi", he said in annoyance.

Sindi: "Friend, I have come to ask you for a huge favour. It is registration day at university and I do not want to stand in those long lines alone. Please, come with me. I have food packed so we won't starve", she begged. I looked at Bonga.

Bonga: "Didn't you say you were in pain?", he asked while looking at me. The thought of me having friends freaked him out for a reason.

Sindi: "Take your pain medicine, I also know that fresh hair is a natural pain reliever. Pretty please don't let me suffer in those lines alone. I'll even go on my knees if need be", she really knelt down before me.

Bonga: "If you no longer feel pain, you can go with her", he said sounding unsure of his words.

Me: "Really?", I said with excitement, too much excitement.

Sindi: "Not like you needed his permission anyway", she looked at Bonga and rolled her eyes.

Me: "Let me go get dressed"

I was almost hopping to the bedroom in happiness. I can not remember the last time I was out. Well I will be standing in line for hours on end but I will not be in this house. I wore a decent looking dress. Dresses are all that I wear and very oversized ones at that because Bonga buys my clothes. He does not want me to wear what other people my age wear. I tied my afro in a bun, put vaseline on my lips and made my way to the door.

Bonga: "I do not like this friendship with this girl. She will turn you into a loose girl when you

hang out with her too much. This is the last time you go somewhere with her", he said in a threatening tone.

Me: "Okay", I said trying to avoid saying things that might lead to an arguments.

Bonga: "I love you"

Me: "Me too", I lied.

Sindi: "Ntombikayise, let us go while it is still early, so we can return quickly", she shouted from the lounge.

I left Bonga standing there and made my way to her. We walked to her home, which was three

houses away from ours, also and RDP but one that was now bigger than the others. It was so beautiful inside and neat. She told me that I could not go out with her looking like a granny, especially not since there will be a lot of hot varsity guys. She is much slender than me so her clothes would be too small for me. She went to another room and shouted for me to follow her. I did and walked into a yellow painted beautiful bedroom. Hers is beautiful too but not like this one.

Sindi: "This is my big sister's room. She is studying far so she

will not mind us borrowing her clothes. I think her clothes will fit you", she said while pulling the sides of my dress making it hug my body.

Me: "Bonga will not like this. He is a rural boy and prefers his women in decent clothes"

Sindi: "Firstly, he is not the boss of you, secondly we will go by car, thirdly it is a sin that you are hiding these curves. I will not make you dress like a street girl, I respect you too much and my sister does not have such clothing. I hope Bonga is not those men who want a decent girl

at home and cheat with girls who wear the clothes he forbids you from wearing or even worse.

Me: "Okay, let me see what she has", I said trying to stop her from speaking about Bonga.

She took out a few clothing items. Her sister had real style and a touch of elegance too. I tried on a few of the clothes and they fit like a glove. I felt so beautiful, I have never felt beautiful. We settled for black high waisted jeans and a red top. I looked at myself in the mirror and realized that I still had my curves. The clothes brought them out so

beautifully. Sindi could not stop complementing me, saying she will start doing squats to get a perfect behind like mine. We finally finished after her dad had been waiting for us for such a long while now. Seeing Sindi's father reminded me of my own father. I miss him so much but I am sure I am as good as dead to him after what I had done to him. We finally arrived at UWC, I have never seen so many people at one place in my life. Young, beautiful people. A few guys kept on turning their heads when we passed them and I'm sure all the

attention was for Sindiswa. She asked around and we finally stood in the correct line. I can't wait until I am the one registering. Sindi said I can apply for the second semester if I don't want to wait until next year. A few guys tried their luck on me and I could not believe other men notice me. After being told I am ugly by Nomvula and then Bonga the mind believed it. I liked the attention but I did not allow myself to be charmed. The day went on well and Sindi managed to get all her things done, she was finally a first year student at

UWC. Her excitement rubbed off on me and I also got excited. She gave me R100 to thank me for going with her. I accepted it, I had even forgotten what how money felt in the hand. I will have my own savings and not bother Bonga. It was a good day, filled with laughter and meeting new people. I could not even take the numbers of the group of girls that we met because I had no phone. At least Sindi will have people to hang out with at school. Poor girls thought that I will also be attending class next week and neither Sindi nor I corrected

them. Sindi's father came to pick us up again. I changed into my oversized dress, thanked Sindi for a good day and left. I'm glad we were able to come home around the same time I usually cook dinner. I was tired, but I gathered the strength to prepare dinner. I hummed Lira's "FEEL GOOD" while chopping veggies. My happiness did not last long. Bonga stormed into the house, almost breaking the door and pushed me against the wall. His hand tightened around my neck as he held me up against the wall. I was trying my best to hit

his arm in order to free myself from his grip, but failed. I was struggling to breathe, I became weaker by the second. I'm sure tonight would be the day this man will kill me, I thought to myself. He loosened his grip and flashed his phone in my face. I was greeted by a picture of me standing with one of the varsity guys who were trying my luck.

Bonga: "I knew you were a slut. You are even wearing the clothes only a slut would wear. You can forget about getting money from me to pay Home Affairs, I will not pay for you to go be a loose

thing at that damn university", he shouted in my face. His breath a mixture of beer and tobacco. I could even feel the little droplets of saliva hit my face while he spoke.

Me: "You would know what a loose girl dresses like because you lay with them. I was not expecting you to give me money anyway. Do you think that I believed a single word that comes from your rotten mouth? I hate you, Bonga", I said bravely. I do not know where I got the courage to say all of that but it was out and all I can

do now is wait for the consequences.

Bonga: "That boy gave it to you so good that you now have the guts to speak to me like that. Was the sex so good, Ntombi?"

He tore my dress open in half, he did it with such ease, one would swear it had an invincible zip. He licked my neck and I have never been more disgusted. The R100 that I put in my bra flew out and landed on the floor. He claimed that it was from that guy I was in the picture with paying me for my sexual services. He slapped me a few times and continued to run

his filthy fingers over my body. I knew that he was about to force himself on me. I fought him off but that seemed to only put fuel on the fire. He unzipped his pants and forced his tongue into my mouth, it felt like I was in my own personal hell. I was not only going to be a victim of emotional and physical abuse, but only a victim of rape. I don't even have happy thoughts that I could think about to escape my reality. There was suddenly a loud annoying knock. He stopped when he realized that it was his drunk loud friends. Bonga would do just

about anything for his good for nothing friends. He told me to go to the room and get dressed. I ran out of there as quickly as I could. I might have been able to get free this time around but I know that I will not always be so lucky. I got to the room, locked the door behind me and I wept. Soon there was so much noise on the other side of the door. It was loud deep voices, girls and loud music. I was back to square one, I no longer have money. I sat on the floor and I gave up on ever getting out of here. Aside from not having money, I'm not going

to bother Sindi with my troubles when she is going through such a happy phase in her life. I will suffer in silence like I have since I was a child. This moment of my life is called "GIVING UP".

Giving up on life itself. I went to my drawer to take painkillers. I looked at the full container of pills and all of me wanted to take them and just die. I took them one by one without water, even chewed some to quicken the process. I got most down and laid on my back waiting for them to work. I felt drowsy fast. My eyes were beginning to close and the

noise has started to fade of into a distance. I must admit, the giving up moment felt good in a way. Knowing that soon I would be free from the burdens this life has given me was satisfying. I heard a knock on the door before I passed out.

FOUR

Bonga

I can't believe that I allowed myself to be persuaded by a woman to go to some meeting where all those men do is cry tears of regret. Had it not been

for my friends who reminded me that I'm a man and should act like one I'd still be on the journey of weakness. I am a man. I earned that title when I went to the mountain years ago. How could I allow Ntombi to manipulate me into sitting with boys and discuss my issues. I'm not an abuser, I'm not my father. Had I been like him Ntombi would have a new bruise on her body each day as my mother had. It hurt me to see my mother suffer because of my drunk of a father. Her death hit me hard. I don't care about the death of that

bastard who killed her even if he is my father. If I could I'd go to where the dead go and kill him. I don't like hurting Ntombi, I love the damn girl so much. But she always makes me hit her or use hurtful words. It's little things that she does that set me off and before I know I've hurt her. I get angry when she does not cook, I get angry when she asks for money for university, I get angry when she calls my friends good for nothings. If she stops pushing my buttons I'd be good to her. At least I know that she can't leave me because she has no

where else to go. I'm sure her parents would chase her away like a dog. We depend on each other. I know that I will never hit her to a point where her heart stops beating. The last incident scared me, I've never hit her to a point where she bled. I want to stop, but she doesn't respect me as her man and for a girl who comes from the rural area where women kiss the ground men work on you'd think she knows better. Well at times she forgets and I as the man of the house will keep reminding her of her place. I can't live without her, parts of her

reminds me of my mother. I had my friends and some girls over at the house. They had no where to go so I was not about to turn them away. These men are my partners in crime, literally. We sell tik and weed for our Nigerian drug lord. The money I made when I was a security was nothing. Now I have a house and living a decent enough life. Ntombi can forget about the money for her documents. I did not go through all that trouble to destroy them only to replace them. Her behaviour today proved that she would leave me the

second she smelled independence. I didn't have her followed but I know people. My best friend's little brother went there to apply too and he could not believe Ntombi looked so "sexy". So sexy that he had to take a picture and compliment me on the beauty I get to touch. I was not going to rape her. I'm a lot of things but a rapist is not one of them. I wanted to scare her and I know that I succeeded. Now I have to make sure she never sees that anorexic Sindi girl again. My boys and their company were hungry, so I went to get Ntombi to

prepare some meat. I turned the door knob and found the door locked. My anger rose once again. She doesn't pay a damn thing in this house yet thinks she has the right to lock doors. I banged on the door loudly, she had better not embarrass me in front of the guys. I don't mind her disrespecting me when we're alone, but she will eat dirt if she does it even the gang is around. I knocked as loud as possible, no reply. I told her I'd count to three and if she has not opened the door, I'd break it open and all hell will break loose. See what I

mean by she makes me a horrible person? I counted to three and there was still silence on the other side of the door. I tried a few times to break the door open until it finally flung open. I can't believe the bitch is sleeping when we have guests. Vusi, my friend came in. Ntombi laid on the bed with just her underwear. I quickly covered her.

Vusi: "Maybe you should share some of that since you're tired of it", he slurred because he was drunk. My jaw clenched out of anger.

Me: "If I ever hear you say that

again, I might just forget that you're my boy", I said while pointing a finger at him. I might not want to touch Ntombi sexually, because she is so boring in bed but the thought of another man having her makes my blood boil. I tried to shake her awake but no success.

Vusi: "Slap the bitch awake. She needs to make that pork we love so much. Are you afraid to show her who is boss. My chick knows, I say jump and she has to ask how high" I hated showing weakness in front of another man, and what Ntombi is doing makes me look like

a man who can't handle his woman. I slapped her cheek and expected her to jump up, but nothing and I realized that something is wrong. I put my fingers against her neck and could not feel a pulse. I started to panick. I shook her again but she was like a rag doll. Vusi picked up an empty table bottle, it was her pain medicine. That bottle should still be full, I should know because I'm the one who collects them from our local clinic.

Me: "No, No, No dammit, Ntombikayise", I shouted when I realized that she has overdosed.

I know I'm not easy to live with but to choose to die then live with me is weak. I wrapped the fleece blanket around, picked her up and rushed to any car that was parked in the yard. The guys never lock their cars, so I knew all were open. My drunk and high guests followed me out looking confused and annoyed. "Keys?!", I shouted. The owner of the car I chose, Luja searched his pockets in panic. He found them and threw them my way. I was a bit drunk but if I don't take her myself, she will die. I was both angry and scared. I got into the car and

sped off. We finally got to the hospital and I ran while carrying her inside. I shouted for help and to my surprise we got help quickly. Usually in state hospitals one almost has to beg for help. They took her away, I followed but that young doctor who helped treat her the last time stopped me on my tracks.

Dr Zim: "What happened? It can't be her injuries causing her problems", she said almost as though she was accusing me of something.

Me: "She took painkillers, an entire bottle", I said trying to hold back

my tears. I don't want her to die.
Dr Zim: "Oh, Ntombi what's wrong?", she mumbled to herself. Give me that empty tablet container. You say she took a full bottle of it?", she asked, I nodded and gave her the bottle. "Wait here, we will do our best", she added before running off disappearing into one of the rooms. I sat down, brushed my hands together and then rubbed them on my head. I didn't know what to do with myself. I even sobered up. "I will change, I will change. Just don't leave me", I said while scratching my head

vigorously like a madman. People in the waiting area were looking at me like I'm crazy. I can't lose another woman whom I love, my mother was one too many loses. I sleep around with whores but I love Ntombi. Maybe even to a point of slight obsession. Hours went by and it feels like I have been waiting since forever. "No news is good news", I tried to convince myself. Had she been dead they would have told me by now, so it means they are still working on her. More and more hours went by when the young doctor finally appeared. I jumped

up from my seat and went to her.

Me: "How is she?"

Dr Zim: "Alive, but weak", she replied.

Me: "I'll go see her", I said walking to the direction she came from. She stopped me in my tracks and looked at me, a very cold look.

Dr Zim: "The patient needs rest. The psychiatrist is still with her. I suggest you come back tomorrow"

Me: "I just want to se..."

Dr Zim: "I said the patient is resting. You can only see her late tomorrow. You can sleep here but

you're not seeing her.", she said cutting me short.

Me: Listen, you damn cow. I will go see her whether..."

Dr Zim: Bonga, you don't frighten me one bit. I know men like you. I don't know what you did to her, but I will find out and use all my persuasion power to convince her to make you pay. She was hurt but not suicidal. She was too excited about her future to kill herself. Your energy feels dark and I know you are responsible. Like I've said, bully. I'm not afraid of you", she said while looking me straight in the eyes,

not a single sign of fear. I've never seen that in a woman's eyes. I was angry so I walked away before I could do something bad to her. I'm sure Ntombi told her some of our personal issues, but I doubt it. She's too afraid, I'm so glad that she's not like this rich Zim woman who doesn't know that a man should be respected. Tomorrow I'll be here before she can brainwash Ntombi into thinking women can speak to a man as they wish. I can't afford for Ntombi to have disrespectful city girl manners. I'm glad she's alive, now I have

to make sure tomorrow she gets out of this place. I need a drink and a good time with some sexy thing to let out the bad emotions I'm feeling. Tomorrow I'll get my woman and no feminist rich doctor will stand in my way.

.

NTOMBI

I came to in a hospital room and realized that I have not died. Bonga doesn't want me, but he also doesn't want me to go. What a confused man! I was awake through the entire process of the stomach pumping. It was not painful, or perhaps it's because

the pain it caused didn't compare to that my heart was feeling. They also gave me something that made me vomit. My throat is sore. Had I known I'd survive I would not have bothered. Those pills were weak I guess. The psychiatrist has been trying to get me to speak to her since the doctor allowed her in my room, I didn't. I felt too empty and ashamed. Dr Zim wanted to get Bonga to see me, but I stopped her. It was as if she had realized something. She didn't ask, just nodded and went out. The lady finally gave up trying to get me

to open up and left me alone. The nurse would come in every other minute. They fear that I might hurt myself, I guess. I stared at the ceiling when I heard the curtain open. Dr Zim came in talking in the softest voice ever. I swear this girl lives at this hospital. She just stood beside me, in silence. Her arms were around me soon enough. I didn't move and she didn't speak. The level of comfort I felt in that moment took me back to my mother's hugs. You know those hugs where you feel safe? It was one of those. It took me back to

the very little memories I have of my late mother. I don't remember much about her but how I felt when she was around will forever be in my memory. Not that Zim's hug was the same, no one's hug could be like my mother's but it was similar in that it had warmth. I felt tears roll down the side of my face, hitting the pillow. I had a void in my heart, a huge one.

Dr Zim: "This is not how it's supposed to end, Ntombi. I don't know what you're going through, but it is not worth you taking your own life. I didn't see it

before, but now I'm certain your boyfriend has something to do with it. Now I suspect that he put you in hospital the first time too. There is plenty of help, all you need to do is ask please", she said softly.

Me: "I was attacked by thugs the first time and I tried to kill myself because my father disowned me, my mother is dead and I have had to witness a neighbor go to school when it should have been me. Tell your mind doctor that", I said in a whisper.

Dr Zim: "I'm not sure if you're

trying to convince yourself or me, but I'm not fooled. Parents don't stay angry at their kids for long. I will give you bus money and you can go home and fix things with them. I'm su... "

Me: "Have you ever been stabbed with a fork for disciplining your sister? Have you ever had to sleep in a flea infested dog house because you came home a minute past curfew? Have you ever had to watch people eat in front of you while you're starving? Have you ever been hit to a point where you still have the scars to show for it? Have you ever had no

support when you try to cry for help? Have you ever lost a mother to death? Those are just a few of the evils I've endured at home.", I said while still looking at the ceiling. I could not see anything because the tears blurred my vision.

Dr Zim: "No, but I had no ide..."

Me: "Things aren't always black and white, Doc. There are grey areas too. I've never had a home. I'm not like you. Don't try to fix what you do not understand.

Please go. I'm tired.

Dr Zim: "I'm sorry for speaking when I don't even know half of

the demons you battle with. I do... " Me: "Please go, Dr Zimkitha.", I shouted. She wiped her tears off, apologized again and left me alone. Doesn't she get it? The help she talks about is for people of her class. She can't understand what I'm going through, she never could. I'm sure she has her bad days but those are nice life problems. I appreciate her trying to help, but I'll be okay. I turned on my side and cried softly. I thought about all the pain I have endured. I realized that I have been hurt since I was six years old when my

dad married again. I can't speak up, no one will listen. I didn't give my dad the benefit of doubt, but I know the control Nomvula had on him. I don't even know if he's still alive. To say I'm sad is an understatement. People like Zim have happy life, with occasional bad days. People like me just have bad days. "You're strong, Ntombi. You've been through the most. Don't be weak now", I said trying to get myself to stop crying but it didn't work. I eventually cried myself to sleep. Dear Happiness and Love, when will you visit my sad heart. I'd love to meet you.

From, Ntombi the ever broken
hearted girl

Five

Dr Zim

To see another woman suffer
because of domestic violence hit
home. I've never been a victim of
abuse, but I know the pain it
causes the victim and her family.
Ntombi thinks that I do not
understand, but as far as
domestic violence is concern, I do.
My father used to hit my mother
too. People think rich mean no
problems, but the darkness that

goes on behind those heavy, expensive doors will shock many. I used to be the little girl who would sit in the corner in my bedroom trying to block out my mother's cries and daddy's shouting by covering my ears with my hands. I think they always thought it asleep because it was always late in the night. My mother would wake up, cook breakfast while humming her favourite songs as though nothing had happened the night before. The young me did not make much of the situation at home because apart from the

occasional exchange of words
everything else was fine. Daddy
still kissed Mommy's cheek in the
morning before going to work. We
still went out for family time.
Mommy looked happy each morning
and she never had a bruise on her
body. It's only now that I'm older
and have a better understanding
of life do I realize that it was all
an act. Mommy acting to protect
me and Daddy acting so he could
always be the good guy in my
eyes. They were good at acting.
I'm an opinionated woman, always
been so I asked what the
occasional shouting and crying

from my mom was. They both mumbled reason I still don't remember to this day. The fighting stopped after I asked about it, things were good or so I thought. My father was a doctor, and that came with a lot of respect from the community. My mother was a nurse, but retired early. That's how they met, both were medical professionals at the same health care Centre. It's no surprise that I'm a doctor, medicine runs through my veins. I don't see myself doing something else. I had a good and privileged upbringing. I was a happy A

student, until things took a turn for the worst when I was 15 years old. I came home from school to find out house surrounded by law officials, an ambulance and nosy neighbors. I made my way through the crowd and chaos only to be greeted by a man pushing a bed, on it was my father with a silver cover over him. I knew it was him because he was wearing the shoes I had gotten him as a gift. I knew they only covered the deceased like that, but I refused to believe my dad was dead. My mother came out of the house looking like a

zombie. It was as if her mind was far away. She was escorted out by the police. I remember running to her to get some clarity on the situation. They would not allow me near her. All she said was my grandma was on her way to get me, that she loves me and was deeply sorry. The police took her away. My grandma sat me down, explained everything to me and my entire world came crashing down. My mother was not arrested because it was self defense, but I hated her. Our relationship was broken. I was a typical daddy's girl. I

remember hearing the fighting, but I didn't believe my father hit her. Ntombi will go home today. She should actually have gone home the day after she came in, but I told them she has to stay at least three days. I thought I'd try to convince her to open up but I couldn't. I also managed to keep Bonga away from her, by breaking a few visitation rights but I don't care. All he wants to do is scare her more into silence. I went to her ward, she was sitting up straight. I went to her bed and closed the blue curtain around us. She hasn't

spoken a word since that day she told me off. The psychiatrist fears she'll hurt herself again, but I don't think so. She wants to live, she just needs a reason to. I'm not one to talk about her personal life with patients, in fact I've never done it before but today I'll open up to her in hope of her doing the same.

Dr Zim: "You're going home today", I said knowing that it's not really good news for her.

Ntombi: "I should have gone home long time ago, but you have been keeping me here. I heard the nurses gossip. What do you want

from me, Doctor?", she said while looking at me.

Me: "And I will not apologize for that. Ntombi, I might not understand your pain but my life is not perfect either", she rolled her eyes at me.

Ntombi: "I never said it was. All I'm saying is that you have rich person problem", she said.

Me: "The things about certain issues is that they don't choose who they will affect according to class and status, like domestic violence for instance"

Ntombi: "How many times must I tell you that Bonga is not an

abuser?", she raised her voice a bit.

Me: "I'm not here to tell you what you already know. Like I've said certain life issues don't care about how fat your bank account is. I might never have been a victim of abuse, but I know someone who has", she looked at me.

Ntombi: "Let me guess, one of your patience who you only saw once and never again?", she said with raised brows. This girl though.

Me: "My mother", I said softly. She suddenly looked at me

attentively. Ntombi: "What happened?", she asked sincerely and with softened eyes.

Me: "She gunned down my father with his own gun in self defense", I said in a whisper to avoid the gossip hospital staff from hearing. I hate that there is no privacy in this place. I told her everything and she looked at me like I was about to crack and break down. I wasn't because I've dealt with my demons by confronting them. Ntombi: "I don't blame your mother for protecting herself. I'm sure she is a strong woman."

Me: "That she is, sometimes too strong.", I laughed softly by the thought of my mother.

Ntombi: "Do you still hate her?", she asked.

Me: "No, through intensive therapy individually and together we were able to find forgiveness for ourselves and each other. I love her, my life is nothing without her. I loved my father, still do even when he's no more but it was all his fault. I've also forgiven him though. I have my bad days but I've healed, Ntombi. If you can get out of the environment that is making you

sick, you can heal too", I said. She was fiddling with her thumbs.

Ntombi: "You and Bonga were no different then. Only his father killed his mother and then himself. He didn't choose to be like this. Somewhere inside is a hurt boy. I can't give up on him.", she said softly.

Me: "I'm sorry to hear that he had to go through it all, but you are not his place to bleed on, Ntombi. Bonga is hurt and tries to put bandages on his wounds to stop the bleeding but he bleeds over those bandages. He needs to acknowledge he has a wound and

be prepared to clean it out. The cleaning will hurt a lot, but it will come with healing. If he is not doing that he will keep on bleeding and he bleeds on you", I said while brushing her shoulder. Ntombi:

"Do you always make emotional wounds sound physical? That description was hectic.", she said trying to change the subject.

Me: "You can joke all you want but you know I'm talking the truth. You are also hurting and not dealing with your past traumas. You two will continue to hurt each other if you don't seek help."

Ntombi: "We are fine. Things

aren't always bad. When will I go?", she asked trying to appear unbothered. She might be too scared and stubborn to hear me now, but at least I've planted a seed. She'll realize soon that I was right.

Me: "You will either be my mom or be Bonga's mom in this story, Ntombi. If you get out now, you can choose to be neither. I'll go sign those papers and go home, I'm tired."

Ntombi: "Tired because you have been playing bodyguard refusing to let Bonga in.", she said and laughed a bit. "Thank you, Dr

Zimmy. I appreciate all that you're trying to do for me. I'm sorry I assumed you've never felt real pain.", she added with a smile. Me: "It's nothing, you just need to learn to accept help. Not everyone wants to break you further. Let me go. I'll tell that gorilla of yours he can see you now even if I don't want him to.", she nodded. I left her bedside and went to sign her release forms. I sent a nurse to tell Bonga he can go see her. I'm really sorry that he had to go through the pain that I did. I'm sure his was worse because he most probably witnessed his

dad hitting his mother and also because he lost both his parents. It still gavr him no right to hit his woman. If they don't seek healing Ntombi will either kill him or he will kill her. There is usually no in between with such issues. I was tired and all I need is my bed. Maybe I should introduce my mom to Ntombi. Perhaps she will listen to a woman who went through the exact same thing. I don't know why I feel connected to Ntombi but I do. I'm hoping that the next time I see her will not be to treat her at the hospital, but to grab a bite and a movie. I

know an intelligent person when I see one and she is one of those, she has just forgotten because of all the lies people like Bonga and her step mom feed her about who she is. I don't have any friends because I rarely connect to people, but with her it's easy. In a different story I'm sure she'd have been a great friend. Ntombi I felt so bad for assuming things about Jimmy. For her to actually open up about her issues means that she cares about me. But I care about Bonga and if I leave we'll both be alone. At least now we have each other. I saw

Zimmy's point after her very descriptive pictures about us not having healed from that which broke us as kids but we can still try. I'm thankful for the peace she managed to give me by not allowing visitors too Bonga walked in and gave me a long tight hug. He smelled okay today, the tobacco scent was not strong and no trace of beer.

Bonga: "I was not going to rape you, Ntombi. I'm not such a monster. If there is anything that I hate is the raping of woman and children. I just wanted to scare you but not to

death, baby.", he said softly.

Me: "Why did you bring me here?", I asked him.

Bonga: "I don't want you to die. Who will you leave me with?", I should have known he did it for his gain.

Me: You don't want me. You tell me day in and day out how ugly I am, how stiff I am in the bedroom and that's why you buy sex. You bring your drunk friends and their high girlfriends to the house. You don't do anything when one of them grabbed my behind that one night. You don't see me, you don't respect me. If I die,

you'll be burden free because that's what I am to you, a useless burden. I'm tired. Your fire destroyed my mother and father's pictures. All I have is the one, and it got saved only because I always keep it with me. You have destroyed my identity. I'm nothing white an ID. You refuse to have a new one made for me. You lied about the prices because dumb me does not know these things. You accuse me of cheating when you're the one cheating, you hit me. I could go on and on. I left with you years back because you were the first person

I confided in about what my father's wife is like, the first man I loved. You promised to love and take care of me but you failed. If I had to choose between the two hells, I'd have chosen Nomvula's. If I had money I'd have gone home, face my father's anger and endure Nomvula because the pain you cause me will kill me.", I said while crying and I was shocked that he let me finish "accusing" him.

Bonga: "I'm a broken man, Ntombi. I'm sorry, baby. I'll now show it to you in action. You must just stop making me so angry.

It's like you want to see just how far my buttons can be pushed. I hate it when you wear tight stuff. Let's go home and find a way to move forward. I'll make sure I'm with you most of the time so you won't do stupid shit again"

Me: "I won't. Go work so we don't starve", I said trying to get that idea out of his mind. The thought of him constantly being around the house is not a good one. I know he doesn't work and the only way he can have money is by crimes. Maybe he's a thief. Dr Zim came in saying she wants to

examine me for the last time before I'm discharged and she goes home. Bonga had a look of disgust in his face when she spoke. Well she didn't once flinch when he gave her a cold stare, she returned the favour until he was the one to look away. She didn't examine me because we both knew I'm good to go. She spoke casually and had Bonga come in. One could cut the tension between them with a knife.

Dr Zim: "Ntombi, you have two options. You either get transported to a stay on therapy centre for six months, two of

which no visitors are allowed or you promise to see a therapist three times a week.", she said.

Bonga: "I've never heard of such!", she shouted.

Dr Zim: "Oh and you would know how, specialist of suicidal cases, guru of psychiatry, oh great master of depression?", she asked sarcastically. Bonga was fuming. He hates being made to seem dumb.

Bonga: "She'll take the ou..."

Dr Zim: "Are you Ntombi?", she asked and pointed at me.

Me: "I'll take the out patient care", I said trying to stop this

fued. Bonga: "I'll take you, sit with you and take you home, baby. I want to support you.

Dr Zim: "Not possible. She won't tell what the cause of the suicide attempt was if you're there.

Everything between her and her therapist is confidential, not even I'm allowed to know. Ntombi, this will be until the therapist is happy with your progress. I honestly don't think you have long term depression, but you are going through a depressing phase because of certain things", she looked at Bonga.

Me: "I'm not depressed. I'll go

and prove it to the therapist. Thank you so much. She smiled and gave me the details of the therapist and the days to see her. Bonga didn't like it but he took comfort in that the therapist may not speak about what I'll tell her to anyone. He said he'll take me and pick me up again. I honestly don't care what he does. I don't have the love that I had for him but I care about him, that's why I keep giving him second chances. A senior doctor on duty came in to tell us that the bed is needed urgently and also asked what is

going on. Dr Zim said she was just making sure I'm ready to go home. She spoke in a shaky voice, not too much though but I know that tone of voice. I used to be like that when my father caught me doing what I was not suppose to, and I'd come up with a lie in a shaky voice to cover up my deeds. It indicated to me that Dr Zim lied about staying at a centre without visits or that it's mandatory that I get psychological help. She tricked Bonga into agreeing to let me go speak with someone. Heck, she even tricked me into thinking I

had no other option but those two. I'm not upset though because this might help me heal from the death of my mother. Maybe having someone to speak to in confidence will help in a way. I checked the details of the lady and her name was Zikhona Bam. Dr Jimmy's surname is Bam. What are the odds of them being related? I took comfort in that she can't tell Jimmy anything even if they are related because it might lead to her losing her psychology reputation and perhaps even go to jail for breaking doctor-patient

confidentiality. What did shock me though was how Mr "I know it all" didn't realize that the good doctor played him for a fool. For a man who claims I'm the dumb one he sure is slow in certain things. I was not about to tell him because I'll get an opportunity to go out of the house, out of the township for a few hours for three days each week. I know I'll be coming back to Bonga but perhaps I will feel better. I suddenly got a bit excited. I'm a people's person, and it was torture to not be out and about. Well I won't be out and about even now, but I'll meet a

new person. I hope she doesn't get annoyed by me and say she doesn't want to see me. I was over thinking the entire situation so much and the excitement was soon replaced by anxiety. I've learned four things about my Doctor. She is kind, she is strong, she is sarcastic and she has a few tricks up her sleeve and I like it. I like her. She stands her ground. The other doctor didn't realize what Jimmy had done because he was in a rush to empty the bed I occupied. I swear I saw Zim breath a slight sigh of relief when he said he

wants the bed empty when he returned. I said goodbye to Dr Zimkitha Bam and we left. When we got home Bonga "asked" me in a rather threatening way to not hang our dirty laundry for the public to see. I suggested he tries therapy too, but he said he's a man and men keep things inside to show just how strong they are. Well each to their own I thought to myself. I'm just happy I'll be breathing fresh air occasionally without having to explain it to him. I promised not to talk about his "mistakes". I'm going there to try and heal from

the childhood wounds Zim talked about. She's right, we're "bleeding" and perhaps by cleaning out my wounds by dealing with my traumas I can help Bonga heal too. I was suddenly filled with hope of what this could do for us. I'm glad I got tricked into it too because I would not have allowed to go had I known that I had a choice not to. Even now that I know I have a choice, I choose healing. I'm going to take the bandages off, allow my wound to be cleaned no matter how painful so that I'll stop bleeding. I can't believe I'm now using Zim's terms

of describing emotional healing, but it was a perfect way to make me realize that there is a lot me and Bonga are hurting from. I'll heal first and then heal him. I was on a mission of healing for me and my man. It will work, it has to work.

SIX

Ntombi

The day of my first appointment has come. I'm suddenly filled with doubts about whether or not I should go. The thought of talking to someone about what is bothering you is not easy. I'm am

naturally a person who keep things to herself no matter how pained I am. Being a rural girl, you were programmed into believing that a woman holds the knife by the sharp end, meaning that no outsider is suppose to know your business. When something is killing you on the inside, find a way to deal with it instead of crying because that will not solve the problem. Speaking to a stranger about my demons is goes against all that I was taught to believe. I have never, not once considered killing myself. I lost my mother at a young age,

was mistreated by my step mom, got abused by my lover, yet never have I thought of ending my life. The fact that I was able to do it indicated to me that I had reached the edge. I'm not going to leave Bonga, I can't. He is my lifeline, my means of living. If I leave him I will most likely end up like those ladies who sleep under bridges and occasionally sell their bodies for food and drugs. I'm sure they too have their demons to deal with and that is why they ended up like that, but I do not want that life. When Bonga is sober and does not see his friends

for a while, he is a better person. He is a good person. Yes, he lies, cheats and hits but I know that he is good. He has been undecided about whether I'm allowed to go see Mrs Bam or not, and I had to keep on reminding him that if he does not agree I will be locked up in a suicide watch centre, though I knew it was not going to happen. He even told me what to tell the lady when she asks certain questions to a point where he drew up a list of possible questions that she might ask and answered them himself and made me rehearse it. I played along and

I might even do as told because though he will not be with me in the room, the thought of him finding out that I spilled the beans to the therapist terrified me. He would teach me a lesson I'm sure not to forget.

I was ready and standing by the door waiting for Bonga to drive me. He does not usually take this long to get ready, sometimes he does not even bother bathing, so I knew that he was stalling. He was trying to make me late for my appointment so that I don't have much time with the lady. I waited patiently because

I did not want to upset him to a point where he locked me in the house, it has happened many times before. He finally appeared and said we could go. We stepped out of the house and into the car. He bought himself an old run down car from his friend. I swear these friends of his are making a fool of him. All of them drive decent cars and live in those decent township houses. I know that he is either in business with them or work for them, but one clearly notices that they get a better cut of the profit. I still do not know what he does and I

have decided that the less I know the better. That way when it is illegal and the police question me to a point where they strap me to a lie detector test machine I would not have to worry because I really would know nothing. I'm sure it will not come to that, but my wild, dramatic imagination has me preparing for whatever. We finally arrived at Hout Bay where Dr Zim said the lady's office was. My heart started to beat faster when Bonga parked the car. The car came to a standstill and neither of us spoke or moved.

Bonga: "Ntombi", he said my name in a soft yet dominating tone.

"Here comes the what will you say to her?" question again, I thought to myself.

Me: "Mmm?", I said while looking at him.

Bonga: "I trust you. I hope that you are slowly leaning to trust me too since I have not had an episode in a while now", he said while tapping the steering wheel. He had not had an episode because I have not opened my mouth about what he said push his buttons that's why. I was not about to say that out loud

and give him a reason to have an episode though.

Me: "It is still early days, Bonga. I am nervous enough about today, so please do not add more emotions on me", I said in a pleading tone of voice.

Bonga: "You will be fine. These people just want to make money of you. They do not care about our issues."

Me: "We are not paying her cent", he laughed. I hate it when he does that.

Bonga: "Oh Ntombi. I forget how dumb you can be. Do you think she would be living in Hout Bay if she

did not get paid by someone. We are not paying her, but the government is and it must be a lot of cash", he said looking at the building and in a tone I did not like at all, like he just had a lightbulb moment.

Me: "Let me go before you insult me more. See you", I said and opened the door but he stopped me, I turned to face him.

Bonga: "I'm sorry. I wanted to give you this before you go", he said taking out a R200 note from his shirt's pocket. "This is what I have so far to save for your ID and certificate. It is not enough

but I want you to keep it, so that you will know just how seriously sorry I am about everything. I will give you the rest when I have more. I'm showing you in action that I have changed,"

Me: "Thank you so much. I will keep it safe.", I said with a smile.

Bonga: "You deserve it, baby", he smiled and kissed me.

We said our goodbyes and I made my way in. I suddenly felt hopeful. Maybe our relationship is going back to how it used to be. I looked at the R200 and put it in my bag. I was so excited. I went

into the beautiful building, asked the security where Mrs Bam's office was. He told me to go to the lady at reception. The receptionist was friendly and told me it was on the 6th floor. I thanked her and was about to walk up the stairs when she suggested the lift. I have never been in one and I told her. She asked one of the young men who passed to take me up. We stepped into the decently lit and sized life. The door closed and I felt it start to move up. "You can open your eyes and let go of my hand now, mam", said the young man

with a smile. I opened my eyes and realized I had been holding his hand tightly, too tightly. I apologised and he said it is okay. He even took me to where I needed to be. I went in and found another receptionist lady. How many of them does this place have? She told me to go sit down and wait a bit. I went to sit on the grey chairs. The place smelled good and looked even more beautiful. The door behind the reception desk flew open, a gentleman and a lady walked out. The man left and my name was called. I swear my heart was

going to come out of my mouth, well that is how it feels like. I stepped into the yellow painted room, well it was a combination of yellow and lime, a beautiful, calming colour. I looked at the middle aged woman who introduced her as Mrs Bam. I had no doubt that she is related to Dr Zim. She knew who I was already. She asked the lady at the front desk to make us coffee. I stood like a weird statue in the center of the room when she told me to sit on the blue couch and get comfortable. She started to make conversation to break the

ice and I must admit she is good. I had stopped sitting a stiff pole and even smiled once or twice.

Seven

Ntombi

I see Mrs B three days in a week Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Today is Wednesday, the second time I'll be seeing her again.

Instead of the fear and anxiety

I felt last time, I now feel at

ease and excited. Bonga had an

"episode" yesterday because I

refused to give him the R200 he

gave me Monday. He wanted to go

and drink I'm sure, I refused at

first but I gave in soon after because I was afraid of making him too angry. He searched the bedroom like mad man, it looks as if a natural disaster had visited our room. He has not been back since yesterday though he knows that he is my means for transport to my therapy sessions. I had made peace with the fact that he won't return in time. He was abusing me even when he didn't try, to deprive me of something that might help me is abuse in my eyes. I don't even have a phone to call and tell Mrs B I'm not coming. I'm sure she'll think

I'm an ungrateful brat who is wasting her time. I was looking forward to seeing her. I took my "good" dress off, I'll wear it Friday when we will have our next appointment. I haven't cleaned the room Bonga messed up and decided I'd do that to distract my mind, I'm feeling sad. I started with all the drawers he had pulled out and thrown on the floor in his rage. Why don't I feel I deserve better than this? Why do I feel like this is a life meant for me and that I'm not worthy of a life like Sindi's and Zim's? I folded the clothes that were scattered

all over the floor, clothes I'd have to iron again. I picked up a small sport's bag from the floor wanting to put it on Bonga's closet. Something fell out and I picked it up. It was a bag filled with green stuff. I took a closer look only to realize it's weed. We had a rasta wannabe who lived next door to us when we lived in the shack and he always had weed, so I'd know it. I searched the bag and found another substance that he didn't recognize. I sat on the bed trying to figure out what Bonga was doing with illegal drugs. Was he

keeping it safe for his friends? I would not put it pass him, he's a friends pleaser. Perhaps he is smoking it? But he would not have money to buy so much, I heard drugs are not cheap. I then thought that he might be dealing, but he is so broke. Aren't drug dealers rich? It would explain why I don't know what he does to put food on the table. My boyfriend is a drug dealer! He puts poison on the streets. I expected petty theft from Bonga, but never selling drugs. I live with a drug dealer. Perhaps even a user. I took one of my shirts and wiped

the pack I held in my hand with it, I've learnt a thing or two about fingerprints on movies. When the police come, I don't want them to know that I knew about this, hopefully they won't strap me to a lie detector machine because they will know that I knew and kept quiet. My mind went into over thinking mode. I hate Bonga for doing this to me. I put the bag at the back of his stuff and continued with my cleaning. "I'm going to go to jail because of this man one day", I whispered to myself out of shock and disbelief. I heard a

knock on the door and then the window. I'm sure Bonga lost his key again. I went to open and Sindi was standing in front of me looking so beautiful. I invited her in but only because Bonga is not home. Sindi: Friend, you need to dump that fool of yours. I thought he was nice, but he is not. He had the nerve to tell me to stay away from you.", she said and rolled her eyes. Me: "Hello, Sindi. I'm fine thanks and you?", I said.

Sindi: "Sarcasm does not look good on you. Anyway, what are you doing?", she said while looking

around the lounge.

Me: "Cleaning. I was suppose to go to my therapy session today because you know...uhm...the suicide attempt", I said in shame.

Sindi: "Many people suffer from depression, so don't be ashamed. I'm just glad that you are still here and because I want you to get better, I'll pay for your taxi to go there. I'm sure you were going to go with Bonga but that won't happen because I saw him at sis Dee's tavern when I went to buy bread earlier on. He looked like he was not thinking about home and even if he was I would

not want you to get into a car with a drunk person behind the wheel. Go get ready, I'll go get the money.", she said with a smile. Me: "Thank you, friend but I don't know how to get there alone. I've never been to town alone.", my words left her bottom lip hanging on the floor due to shock.

Sindi: "Okay, I'll go get dressed and go with you. I'll window shop while you are busy. This is important, my friend needs help and I'm going to help her by taking her to the help. Wait, did that make sense?", she said looking confused and I laughed.

Me: "Perfect sense. Thanks again, go get ready, we're late already"

Sindi: "Oh my goodness, I won't have time to put my face on!", she said with a frown.

Me: "You don't need make up", I said and she raised her left brow.

Sindi: "Says the girl who only uses vaseline for all purposes, yet still looks radiant. Some mothers wombs are a beautiful spa I'm sure and they give birth to people like you", she joked and we both laughed. I don't see the beauty she sees, but I was not about to debate about that. She ran out going to get herself decent. I

wish she knew just how beautiful she is without the face filters. I went to put on my "good" dress again. It was the only dress that didn't sag too much. I unplaited my afro and combed in out, leaving it big. We were finally ready to go. Sindi looked at the address on Mrs B's card and knew the place. She explained to me what I should say to the driver should I have to come alone someday. I appreciated her so much. We finally got there and I was 15 minutes late for my appointment. I wanted to run up the stairs, but Sindi dragged me to the lift.

I held her hand tightly, like I did with that guy on Monday. She laughed and said I have the "Velaphi Mjongeni" syndrome. I didn't get it at first but did and I laughed so much. The lift opened and the guy who helped me up the lift stood in front of it. He and Sindi locked eyes and it was as if though I didn't even exist. He cleared his throat and greeted. Sindi, the big mouth could not even let out a simple "Hi". She finally told me that she'll be back within an hour or so. I thanked her again and stepped out of the lift. The guy walked in

and I swear I saw a wet spot under her arms. He was making her sweat, literally. I waved goodbye until the lift shut. I suddenly wished I could be a fly on the wall in that life. I ran to Mrs B's office and she was waiting for me at reception. She came to hug me as soon as I walked in and let out a sigh of relief. It's almost as though she thought something bad had happened to me. I apologized and we went inside. She had all kinds of yummy goods on platters on the table, it was sweet and savory goods. I asked what the occasion was and

she said she bought it for a party they had earlier on but some was left over and that I should help myself and also take some home if I want. I looked at the platter and it has not even been touched. Had it been leftovers, the platter would not look so full and still well arranged. I didn't ask, I just thanked her and helped myself, we both did. She told me that she booked me for two hours instead of one. I was shocked, but grateful. I love being with her. We made ourselves comfortable and talked about some stuff. I asked her to tell me about my

mom, I just could not pretend like I was here for anything else. She laughed and nodded. She took pictures from her little table beside her and gave them to me. I looked at it and saw two little girls on a black and white picture, their smiles were so beautiful and filled with happiness. In the other picture was my mom, clearly in her early teens on this one, she looked so beautiful. The third one was clearly her and Mrs B and I'm guessing in their mid or late teens, such beauties. I smiled and held them close to my chest.

Mrs B: "We were so close. Where I

was Nobandla was too and vice versa", she laughed. "When you described her on Monday and I realized it was her, I laughed because that was Bandla for you. I was a bit of a tomboy, but she drilled lady behaviour in me and I haven't forgotten her lessons. I've spent the entire Monday just crying for her loss. I know it has been years since her passing but to me it's still so raw. Still so unbelievable, even had to cancel my other appointments. I always thought I'd go back and see her and her family again thinking that I'd find her since I didn't

the first time I went to check on her. To see if she finally became the nurse she dreamt of being", she said softly.

Me: "She was a part time domestic worker. My step mother used to say that she ran away with my father. I don't know her family nor where her home is. If what Nomvula said about her running away with my dad is true, it means that she was really not from Queenstown. My father got upset when I'd ask about her and her family."

Mrs B: "Your step mother was right in that she might have left

home. Nobandla and I were both from Peddie. She has a little brother, meaning you have an uncle on her side of the family. Her father had his own farm with sheep and cattle, and back then it meant that your family is rich when they have livestock. That's what our fathers had in common, farming. We were considered what is now known as "privileged kids" in our village. We didn't have everything, but we never starved. Our mothers were typical Xhosa housewives who respected their husbands and our culture so much.

Me: "So my mother leave Peddie after you had left?", I asked and she nodded her head.

Mrs B: "I think she might have left not long after I did for reasons only known to her and your father and her family. I left home when I heard about nursing and social work opportunities for black women in Joburg. I told Bandla about it too and we were both excited to go see the city of gold. My parents let me go and pursue the opportunity but your mom came with bad news, your grandparents did not want their child going to Gauteng. A young

woman right next door to your grandparents house worked in Jozi and came home sick and thin one day. It came out that she had aids. This was back in old rural Eastern Cape when having HIV was considered a death sentence, well in most cases it was because the treatment was not as good as it is now. To your grandparents Jozi meant getting the disease everyone dreaded. My parents had their concerns too, but I managed to convince them not to. Our hearts were heartbroken when we heard we would be apart. Your mom and I

were always together, but growing up meant going our separate ways. The day that I left was the saddest but we took comfort in knowing that I'd visit, little..litt...little did I know that would be the last time that I saw her.", she struggled to speak through the tears. I wrapped my arm around her in comfort. "If only I had visited sooner as I promised her I would. I would have had a chance to say goodbye before she moved away", she said in utter regret.

Me: "You didn't know what life had in store, we never do", I said

trying to comfort her.

Mrs B: "But still, she was my best friend, the twin I never had. I should have visited the next month, but things were hectic in Joburg. When I got to Jozi, I just got too busy to visit home and it got worse when I met Zim's dad and moved to Cape Town with him. I hardly visited because he somehow convinced me that he needs me more. When Zim's father was ready to lobola, I finally got a chance to go home, but Bandla was already gone. My father forgot about me not coming to see them after years

and would say "at least you wrote to us, meaning you didn't forget about us". I think he was just happy that I married a Xhosa man who was a doctor of all things. My grandmother said that I won't have a good marriage though because she didn't trust Mike, that he was too good to be true almost as if he is rehearsed all the answers to the questions my father asked to not say the wrong thing. It turned out she was right." Me: "Do you regret it, not listening to your grandma seeing how your marriage to Mr Bam ended?", I

asked and she slowly shook her head.

Mrs B: "Things were bad during the last few years leading to his death, but the struggles taught me things I'd never have learnt had I been home. I'm much stronger now. I regret that I took Mike's life, but it was either me or him. So, now that you know where your mother's family is, will you go see them?", her question was so unexpected, trying to get us to talk about me again.

Me: "No, they are strangers to me and I'm sure they will let me pay for my mother's sins,

whatever they may be but something tells me that they did not part on good terms. I'll be a reminder of how my mother was when I tell them about my life. Like my mother, I too, took off with a man leaving family behind." Mrs B: "Your grandparents aren't like that and they are old now. I know they will welcome you home well. Your uncle has children, which means cousins you never had.", she said with enthusiasm. "You said the last time you felt like you belonged was when your mother was alive, her family might be your safe haven. I can tell you

exactly where they live. To see my best friend's baby suffer and almost having killed herself pains me. You also have a mother in me now. Nobandla and I always dreamed of raising kids who would be best friends, maybe even get married so we would share grandkids", she laughed. "Such good times. You know Zim and me now. If you feel like you've got no where else to turn to come to our home. You're my baby, Ntombi. I'm sure had your mother and I not parted you'd have known how much I love you. Nobandla loved my children even before she knew

I'd have any and I hers, the thought of you children existing made our hearts full. I might be grieving her because her death is new to me, but she left me a gift to remember her by. Surely God was not misken when he chose Zim to treat you. Do you believe in God?", she asked.

Me: "Thank you for trying to help me, I appreciate you saying such kind words. No, I don't believe in God", I said thinking she'd judge me like all the Christians who have come at my house.

Mrs B: "Relax, I won't force my beliefs on you. Is there a reason

why you don't believe in God?"

Me: "Because it seems He has favourites. Some of us are living suffering and never ending sorrow, while others don't."

Mrs B: "Let us leave it at that before I start preaching. Praying also helps a lot. Your mother and I were both Methodists, so I'm sure she taught you prayer because her faith couldn't be shaken by anything. Something tells me you stopped believing in the power of prayer after she died, more so when your father married a woman who used to beat you and even more so now

that you are unhappy."

Me: "That's true", I said in a whisper.

Mrs B: "I suggest that you go back to your mother's teachings and let's see what happens. I don't think you suffer from depression, Ntombi. You live in a depressing environment, know the difference."

Me: "I thought you said you weren't going to force your religion on me, now you're telling me to pray"

Mrs B: "I'm telling you to remember what your mom taught you. If she taught you prayer, it

means that she believed it would help you. I know prayer helps. I've personally seen God's love, grace, mercy and forgiveness in my life. Let me stop there."

Me: "She always did encourage me to pray, I remember that about her too. She died a Methodist by the way, she wore her church attire with such pride. Her red jacket, white shoulder things, white hat and b... "

Mrs B: "Black skirt!", she finished my sentence and we both laughed. "I'm also still a Methodist and wear that same attire. Oh, Bandla", she said with a smile as

though she was deep in thought.
Me: "My father is a traditional man, never believed in church, always just ancestors. The last time I went to church was on the day of her funeral. I was there, you know...when she took her last breath. That's a memory that will forever be in my mind. I was a child but I remember that particular day so much. She had been so thin already. My father was at work, our neighbor would come, wash and feed her. On the last day, I remember she asked that I get her red church jacket and her shoulder cloth out. She

didn't have much strength, but on that day she sat up and I helped her put the jacket on and put the shoulder attire on too. She laid back down and started to sing her favourite hymn... "

Mrs B: "Bulelani ku Yehova?", she said and we both wept.

Me: "Her coughing would disturb her, but she kept on. I put my head on her lap and I sang with her. I knew each word because she had sung it so much before. We laid down on our sides, I clung to her jacket so much, I was so afraid. She sang until I fell asleep. My father had come home

while I slept, but woke me up saying that I need to get up. That the ancestors have taken her. The church people said God had taken her. I was so confused because I didn't know who to hate between God and the ancestors. Who between them too my mother? I chose to turn my anger to God because my father said that ancestors are family who had gone. So in my little mind back then I thought no family, dead or alive would bring me such pain. On the day of her funeral, they laid her church attire on top of her coffin. Knowing she would

never use it again was painful. Even today I can't stand the sight of a woman in her Methodist Church attire. I mi... Mi.. Miss her so much, Ma Bam. A part of me died with her, it died and left a black hole there.", I said not realizing that I had started to shake. She held me so tightly, like she feared my shaking would lead to me breaking, literally. I finally calmed down and I felt a bit better. I've never shared that with anyone and I guess letting it out was what was needed.

Mrs B: "We tend to remember

childhood memories vividly when it either made us happy or caused us trauma. Your mother's passing came with trauma that no one helped you deal with but I'm here now, I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. God is not to blame, baby. He loves you and is with you all the time. Please just open up the door of that weary heart and let Him in. Oh, Ntombi there is power in the word of God. Your mother knew it, that's why she went singing the gospel because she had no fear of what was next. I'm sure she didn't want to leave you, but she knew better

than to question God. Let me stop there before I scare you off with my beliefs."

Me: "I'm feeling a bit better after speaking about that day. Thank you"

Mrs B: "That's why I'm here. You can call or come over whenever. I'll write my address down for you. I haven't told Zim that I knew your mom because I can't tell her what we discuss here but can I tell her that you are Nobandla's. I've spoken about your mother so much. I want to tell her that I found a second daughter", I laughed a bit.

Me: "You can tell her. Do you visit home?"

Mrs B: "I do. My father is late though and my mother lives with my eldest sister in King Williams Town. We have a good enough relationship. I also still go and see your grandparents when I'm there. They miss your mother. They don't even know she's dead or they would have told me or they heard a rumour but refuse to believe it. You can be the closure they need, Ntombi." I asked that we change the subject on prayer and me meeting my mother's family by telling me the

fun stories about her and my mom's upbringing. I laughed so much, one would swear I didn't just cry earlier on. I've cried a lot today. I would never have guessed Mama to be so naughty. We went beyond the two hours she booked me for when her next appointment cancelled. It was great. We laughed and cried more. I got more emotional when she said that I'm healing her in a way. I've been told I'm annoying, ugly, a bad person, unlovable but never has someone said that my presence brings them peace. I opened up a bit about my

situation with Bonga. Unlike Zim she didn't go on about leaving and getting help. She understood that it was not easy to do, for various reasons but she advised me to choose myself before I lose myself in Bonga's toxins completely. Deep down I knew she was right and it coming from her, a domestic violence survivor made me think a lot. Our three hours came to an end. I felt a sadness wash over me when I had to leave and go back to my reality. She had her PA put the leftover food in containers for me and also wanted to me money but I

declined. I took her cellphone number and address also. She hugged me and I went out, I heard her hum "Bulelani ku Yehova", she almost did it like my mom used to. I stood outside the building waiting for Sindi, she finally came wearing a big smile on her face saying she's met her husband. I was so happy to see her happy. I offered her some food but she said "Bae" took her out. I couldn't believe she's in a relationship with a man she just met. We both laughed at how silly it sounded but she was happy and I was not about to burst her

bubble. I told her a few details about my session today. We got into the taxi and went home. Sindi went home and I went inside the yard. Bonga's old car was parked on the grass and my mood just dropped. I went inside and closed the door behind me. I felt a hard slap on my cheek the minute I turned around. It was such a power slap that my other cheek went against the door causing me to lose my balance, falling to the floor. Bonga went on about how he warned me about seeing Sindi again and about when he can't take me to Mrs B it meant I'm

not allowed to go alone or with anyone else. He went to the kitchen and I feared its to get a knife but I heard the door open and close. His loud engine indicated that he's leaving. I tried to stand up, but I was too light headed to. I sat back down and started crying. The food I came with decorated the floor. I closed my eyes, hoping that it would bring my balance back. I thought of praying, I remember going on my knees and putting my hands together while my mother prayed but she never taught me any other prayer except Our Father.

I tried to remember what she said when she prayed but couldn't so I decided to recite the prayer that she instilled in me since I was very young. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." I stuttered through tears until I said Amen. I sat hoping that I would feel better, but I'm didn't feel any different. I was certain my prayer got to the roof and fell back down again, never reach God. I stood and started to clean the mess and went to lay down afterwards. I

know he went back on his promise to not hit me again, but at least it was just a slap. I thought to myself trying once again to justify Bonga's actions, even though I'm the one in pain physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally. I was exhausted and worn out. I didn't feel a difference after praying either, so clearly it's not meant for me.

EIGHT

Ntombi

I went to the bathroom to bath, I always bath twice a day. I

stood in front of the little cabinet that was nailed to the wall, it has a mirror in front of it. I stood closer to it and realized that I had an open bruise. When I hit my face against the door, I guess it was too powerful. I was not what society would label as a yellow bone, but the bruise was visible, it has red and purple colors around it. I took a closer look and saw a small cut that was bleeding. I touched it and flinched due to the pain. The blood has already dried up. I didn't think it would look so bad because it does not feel as bad as it looks, or is it

because I've gotten used to the pain. I soaked my face cloth in warm water and gently soothed the bruise. It stung a bit, but I knew that I had to clean it in order for it to heal quickly. My cheek is also starting to swell. I was also still waiting for the prayer that I prayed to work. How long does it take for them to be answered or was I right when I said mine only reached the ceiling and not heaven? I finished bathing and went to empty the plastic wash basin outside. The basin slipped in one side and made me wet. I threw it against a

brick wall and it broke. "You spilt dirty water that had your own dirt in it and proceeded to throw the basin away, yet Bonga throws dirt on you but you don't throw him away by leaving him", said a voice inside my head. I didn't even try to check if the basin was in good condition to still use. I walked back into the house, wore a jersey and went to Sindi's home. I practically ran to their yard because it had already gone dark outside. Their lights were still on so it means they are still awake. I'm lifted my hand ready to knock when I lowered it again,

wondering if what I'm thinking about doing it the right decision. I paced up and down in front of the door when there was suddenly a light shining on the ground from the inside, someone has opened the door. I was standing in the dark side so he could not see me. He was holding a stick with a huge knob on top. I made my way to the light so he'd see that I'm not a danger to him and his family. He raised the stick ready to lower it down on my body. Me: "It's me Ntombikayise, Tat' uKoni", I shouted while covering my face.

Mr Koni: "Ntombi? What are you doing here so late, my child. I nearly broke your ribs because I thought it's these tik heads trying to steal my car. Come in, come in", he said while holding my arm and gently leading me inside his house. Sindi jumped from her seat when she saw its me.

Sindi: "Ntombi, what's wrong? Why is your cheek swollen and red? What did that pig did to you? Tata, he hit her, I know that pig hit her!", she shouted while looking at her father.

Mr Koni: "I will go show that coward who a man should fight,

instead of hitting on helpless young ladies.", he said walking out still holding his weapon. I stopped him because he'd be going to an empty house.

Me: "Tata, you won't find him home. I know that you want to help that's why I came here. I need your help", I said trying to hold back my tears. I don't usually ask for help so I don't know how they will react.

Sindi: Of course you can sleep here. I'll go get my sister's room ready for you.", she said.

Me: "I'm grateful, friend, but I can't" Mr Koni: "I'm not afraid of

that boy, so if you fear he'll come here and hurt you, don't worry. No child will suffer when I'm here, especially a girl child", he said with anger.

Me: "Tata, he will know I'm here. It's not Bonga that you should be afraid of but the people he hangs out with. I suspect that they are gangsters. I don't want trouble for you. Please help me by taking me to this address", I said taking out Mrs B's address.

Sindi: "What is there?"

Me: "Someone that I trust, friend. Bonga doesn't know where she lives so he won't find me."

Sindi: "Let me see so I'd know where you are", she held her arm out to me.

Me: "I prefer that you don't know where it is. Bonga knows you're my friend and when he asks I want you to really not know where I am because you might let something slip out of anger.", my words left her unhappy.

Sindi: "Okay", she said in a sad whisper.

Mr Koni: "Ntombi, am I not taking you to wolves, my child?", he sounded concerned.

Me: "No, Tata. I promise"

Mr Koni: "Let us go then before

he returns. Where are your clothes?" Me: "I didn't pack any because I feared he'd return while I'm busy doing so"

Sindi: "I told Vuyi about you and how well her clothes fit you. She told me to give some to you.

Luckily I washed and packed them today. Let me go get the bag quickly. It's as if God knew you'd be in need of them.", she said while running down the passage to her sister's room.

Mr Koni: "Ntombi, how long has he been doing this?"

Me: "It's been too long, Tata", I said softly. M

r Koni: "And you don't come and cry to us? You're too young for this. As a father of girls it pains me to see another hurting. These boys are worth nothing, my child.

Return home before you die in these Cape Town townships."

Me: "That's why I have to go to the people I'm going to. They might take me back home", I lied but only because I didn't have time to explain why I'm in a township in Cape Town and not at home. I don't want more pity, just help. Sindi came with a big red suitcase filled with stuff. We thanked her and hugged her

goodbye. I promised to call her whenever I can so she would know I'm okay. Her father put the suitcase in the boot and we drove off. I don't even know how Mrs B will welcome me. I'm hoping that she won't mind the unexpected visit. We finally arrived at her complex. The security asked us a few questions and dialed Mrs B. He then opened the gate for us. The houses here were so beautiful and it looked safe. Mrs B stood in her driveway in her purple gown. She didn't even wait for the car to park before she opened the door, gentle

pulled me out and hugged me. It was as she knew that Bonga had another episode. She looked at my face and I saw sadness in her eyes. Mr Koni greeted her. Mrs B wanted to give him money, but he declined. He also promised to not tell a soul about my whereabouts, I believed him. He took out my bag, gave me a hug and drove off. Mrs B dragged the wheeled suitcase inside. I couldn't believe how beautiful her house was. It was not those huge, double story houses. It was nice and cosy.

Me: "Ma, I'm sorry that I just came like this and most probably

even ruining our professional relationship as pat... "

Mrs B: "We went beyond that relationship when I found out I'm your aunt. I never ever want to hear you apologize for coming to me for help. I'm glad that it's me you chose to come to. Here you'll be safe. I've got an alarm system and you saw the security guards and gatw system when you came in. No Bonga or any fool will hurt you and when you're ready to press chargers I'll go with you. I love you, Ntombi", she cut me short and hugged me.

Me: "Thank you and I love you

too", I said with tears rolling down my face. I really did love her. Mrs B: "I'll go make you some food and a glass of nice hot chocolate. We can sit and talk or you can go sleep when you're done, but before I do anything, let me look at that bruise and cut. I've got some decent supplies in my first aid kit" Me: "Perks of having a doctor for a daughter", we both laughed.

Mrs B: "Ahh not really, that one hates it when I take medicine when I haven't seen a doctor. Even know I'll get an earfull because I didn't take you to the

emergency room.", we laughed again.

Me: "Thank you for everything, Ma. I will not overstay my welcome. I just need to recharge"

Mrs B: "I pray that after you've recharged, you'll use that full energy to working on healing yourself and creating a future without him for yourself.", I just nodded. I don't know what a future without Bonga is like, I can't even imagine it. She went to take her first aid kit and tended to my bruise. That was followed by a great home cooked meal. She later made hot chocolate and

cookies. If I didn't know better I'd say she's trying to make me gain weight. I enjoyed the all and it felt good to be a child again. She advised that I go wear my pajamas so we'd watch a movie while snuggling on the couch. I didn't even know if there was pajamas amongst the clothes I literally just got from Sindi. I opened the suitcase and smiled at the beautifully coloured clothes that were neatly packed. Bonga only bought me loose fitting, long dresses that were either grey, black or brown. He didn't want me to wear anything that would

make other men notice me. I took the items out one by one holding them against my body. It's crazy how Sindi's sister and I are the same size. I finally came across a night dress. It was navy with pink hearts, I love it and I also found a matching gown. Vuyi has great taste, I can't wait to meet her and thank her. I put on the night dress and gown and made my way to the lounge. Mrs B said we'll be watching comedy because we both needed a great laugh. There was a knock at the door and I jumped up from my seat fearing that Bonga found

me. She calmed me down before opening. It was her daughter. Mrs B said Zim has her own place but also "lives" with her. I wouldn't completely move out if I had such a mom either. I thought Zim would be jealous of me living with her mom, but instead gave me a long welcoming hug. The three of us sat and watched the movie, we laughed until tears formed in our eyes. I even forgot that I have issues to deal with. Mrs B excused herself after the movie saying she's sleepy but we first had to pray. I was not about to show

disrespect by refusing to join them in prayer. We held hands and knelt down. Zim prayed for us. I could never pray that well. We hugged after the prayer. Mrs B told Zim not to make me sleep late. She said goodnight and disappeared into her room.

Me: "Dr Zim, I won't take advantage of your mother's kindness, I promise. I'll stay for a day or two. I know my suitcase indicates otherwise, but it's because a friend of mine gave me her sister's old clothes.", I said quickly.

Dr Zim: "That has not even

crossed my mind. I'm happy that you are here. We can share my room that's not really my room since I've "moved out" but don't for one second think I don't want you here. My mom is alone most times and I'm happy that you're here, so please, I beg stay as long as you wish. Our mothers were "sisters" so we are also sisters now."

Me: "Thank you, doc"

Dr Zim: "And stop calling me doctor", she laughed. "I'm not even one yet, still in training. Do you want to go shopping with me some time? I always wanted to

do sisterly things with a sister but never had one. Do you think we'll have sibling rivalry?"

Me: "I don't know about the rivalry", I said while laughing. "I can't go out with you either. I can't risk him seeing me. He's most probably looking for me as we speak. He might come to you at work too or follow you and know where I am.", I said while breathing heavily. It felt like I was going to die.

Zim: "Breath, breath Ntombi. I'm way more street smart than people give me credit for. I'm ready for bitchy men any day. He

won't think of asking my mom because mom told me that you didn't tell him that she was your mother's friend. Don't worry, I won't lead him here and I doubt he'd take chances in a suburb. Bonga is a small town crook, he can only navigate through the township but not here."

Me: "You don't know him"

Dr Zim: "Well he doesn't know us either. Stop worrying. Can you imagine what my mom would do to me if you have a panic attack while left with me?", she said in a funny tone and we both laughed.

Me: "I'm scared. I'm scared for

Sindi and her father. I'm scared for you and your mother. I shouldn't bring you into my mess. I should go back.", I stood and she stopped me.

Dr Zim: "Ntombi, sit", she commanded and I did. She stood and went to the bedroom and came back after a while holding a gun.

Me: "Why do you have that?", I said while backing away. I was not scared but you never know, accidents happen.

Dr Z: "I'm trained to handle her, don't worry and right now it's not loaded. If Bonga tries to come

here things will get ugly. Even if he follows me, things will get ugly", she said sounding so serious. I didn't ask more questions, but clearly Zim is a girl who can look after herself. She asked that I not tell her mom because Mrs B hates guns since the day she had to shoot her hubby in self defense. I hope Bonga knowd that not all girls are afraid like me. It looks like Zim would really hurt him with that things should she be pushed. How did such a suburb girl get so gangsta? She's suppose to have a panic button and pepper spray, not a gun. I'm

just glad that it's licensed and she knows how to aim. We put on another movie but didn't really watch this one because we were talking so much. She opened up about how she's afraid of marriage and that's led to a two year engagement with her person. I told her to tell him, but she's afraid he'll leave. We shared our childhood memories and so much more. She even promised to sneak in wine tomorrow after work so we'd have it in our room without mom knowing. I've never drank before, never ever but I've seen how fancy wine looks on TV so I'll

try it. She also sounds like she was a party animal. I knew I couldn't fully be relaxed because Bonga might find me, but I enjoyed the night a lot. If he find me and kills me, at least my last moment would have been spent laughing and plotting mischief with my new sister. She hugged me so much, like she couldn't believe there is someone about her age in the house. I couldn't believe how at home I felt. I usually take a long while to adapt, but not tonight. Tonight I had a sense of belonging, something I hadn't had since my mom died.

Mrs B When the security called to say Ntombi was at the gate, I felt a mixture of worry and joy. She was worried because when you're in an abusive relationship you could get hurt to a point where you don't recognize yourself in the mirror. I felt joy because my child had come, I didn't care what state she was in, all that mattered was that she came to me. Nobandla must be turning in her grave seeing her child suffer this way. I will give my friend rest by helping her child. I've been praying to God to show me the way to handle this situation

with Ntombi. If she doesn't want to go to her grandparents, I can't force her but I know they will love. She would be their only link to Bandla, their long lost daughter. I wish I could finally hear the truth about what made Bandla run away from home. I sat on my bed reading my Bible and could hear the sweet laughter that came from the girls. I wish Ntombi could laugh every day. I pray that she finds the courage to leave that pig. I'm sure Zim is happy to have company and knowing her she's most probably trying to convince

Ntombi to go to a wine tasting event or go out dancing. She's a good child but I'm aware that she can't be perfect. She will also never endanger Ntombi. I'm sure she'll try to convince Ntombi to go to the youth church gathering with her. I don't want to push Ntombi to go to church or be like us. I want her to know that we will accept her as is. If all goes according to me she'd return to school and be independent like Zim. Zim is semi independent, she is yet to fully let go. I thought she'd be married by now but she and her man keep stalling. The

families will just have to wait on them. I'm sure Ntombi will meet a kind young man too someday, but that's the last thing she needs now. To depend on another man. I want her to learn to love herself first, but my ultimate wish is for her to discover real love, never ending love that can only be found in God. I'll keep praying for such a day that my child will realize that people will only love her to certain extent and therefore she should focus on the love God has for her. May God lead me and show me the way to love her too. I laid on my side and

heard the loudest giggles ever and I was not about to shush them because their laughter was music to my ears. I smiled and closed my eyes with no worries because I know that my God will fix whatever I fail to. He will do all the work, all I have to do is make use of the resources he gives me. I will not fail, I can't fail.

NINE

Bonga

I went out with friends and got drunk on purpose because I didn't want Ntombi to go to that

stupid therapist. I know how such things work. The therapist asks the patient tricky questions and patients end up spilling the bean on some deep, personal things. Ntombi will find herself telling that woman that I've hit her a few times and the therapist will lay a charge of domestic violence against me without Ntombi's consent. This patient doctor confidentiality only goes so far. When a doctor feels their patients life is at risk they can tell a third person without the consent of the patient. All it the name of "saving a life".

Ntombi doesn't need saving because her life is in no danger. My friends advised me to put my foot down and forbid her from going. I thought me not pitching to pick her up at home would have been enough to make her realize that I don't want her to go, but no, she just had to play smart by asking that slut Sindi to help her. You know because I have eyes everywhere. Someone saw them getting on a taxi together. I didn't believe it first because Ntombi has never bothered to go to town alone. The furthest she's been out alone was

to go to our local spaza, which was just a street away. She does not know how the taxi system works either, so obviously that skinny witch Sindi is corrupting my woman. I wanted to go to Sindi's home, but I'm know better than to anger her old man. We grew up hearing that he is a gangster hiding behind a police uniform. I once saw with my own eyes how he nearly beat up a drug dealer to death with his bare hands. After realizing Ntombi had gone I went back to my friends, they advised me to teach her a lesson. There is only one way to teach a woman

without respect for her man a lesson. I went and waited at home. She came home late, there's no way she was at the therapist all that time. I just saw red when she opened the door. She even had the nerve to hum a song. I don't remember hitting her, all I remember is seeing her on the floor. I think her cheek was bleeding. Damn I hate what she makes me do! She even had the nerve to bring leftovers of the food another man bought for her. That was expensive looking food, the kind rich people eat at these fancy

parties of theirs, so it couldn't come from Sindi, she can't afford such, had it been a pie, yes but fancy finger food, no! I returned to the tavern to calm down. I sat alone and decided to go home after a while. I want to ask Ntombi myself where she has been almost all day. I got into my car and drove off. I was still a bit drunk, but I'm can't drive. When I arrived home I found the house completely empty. I at first feared that she went to the police, but remembered that Ntombi is a weak woman, she won't dare go. I decided to go look

for her at Sindi's home. I didn't see her father's car in their garage, so he must be gone. I went and knocked like a madman. Sindi: "You break that door, you pay for it!", she shouted and opened the door. I could see that she was not expecting to see me. I've never been in their yard before.

Me: "Where the hell is she?", I shouted while looking behind her hoping to see Ntombi.

Sindi: "Tata!", she shouted loudly.

Me: "Hey! I know he isn't home. I don't want trouble. Just give me what's mine", I shouted while in

his face. She backed down, clearly a bit rattled.

Sindi: "Give you what's yours? Are we still talking about a human being with rights here or a piece of meat? Hey scum, Ntombi is not "what's yours", she's her own woman. She is not here, I don't know where she is and even if I did I'd rather die than tell you", she said and looked at me with a cold stare.

Me: "Well that can be arra..."

Sindi: "Tata! Tata!...", she shouted loudly and that's when I noticed car lights flashing behind me. Her father came out of the

car flying. I shoved Sindi aside and went into the house hoping to find Ntombi. I didn't make it far when I felt her father hit me on the back with something. I lost my balance a bit. I turned to try and fight him, but he hit me over and over again. Sindi was kicking my ribs helping her father to defeat me. Their white tiles were now red with my blood, they weren't lying about him giving a real beating to those who hurt his loved ones, but I didn't do that. All I want is my girlfriend and I'll go. Sindi's father dragged me outside and Sindi shouted for

everyone to hear how I tried to kill her. People in my township believe in mob justice, necklacing being their favourite. A few men came with home weapons, from sticks, to knives, and I saw one with a tyre and patrol. I knew that if I didn't get out fast, I'd die a painful death.

Mr Koni: "I'm sure Ntombi will thank her neighbors for getting rid of an abusive drunk like you. Its men like you who put shame on us. I was angry when I heard what Ntombi said you did to her, but to dare touch my child? My child?! Men, let's get rid of this

pest. He also sells your children drugs! Random Man: "Let the dog die already!", shouted the man while lifting a huge rock. I knew its to crush my head. Why are people so cruel? A man can't go look for his woman now? In the rural areas they would have handed Ntombi over and told her to go sort things out with her man. Clearly these men are uncultured. I got beaten more and each new blow was more painful than the last one. I felt someone put a tyre over my head and around my body. It was in that moment that I accepted

death. The petrol got poured over me and I wept. I wept like a boy. It took me back to when I would cry when my father hit my mother. I didn't choose to be a bad person. Life has just never been kind to me. I have family back in the Eastern Cape, but since I've been with Ntombi, I can't visit because I don't want to leave Ntombi alone and don't want to take her to the rural areas because she might want to stay. Two very loud banging sounds brought me back to reality. There was suddenly chaos and perfect were running in all

directions. I thought someone had decided to kill me fast, and if that's the case I'll be grateful to that person. Gunshot is better than burning to death. I felt my body get weaker by the second. If I come out of this alive, Ntombi had better hope that I don't find her because I'm here because of her. I'm sure she was even in the crowd watching while I'm being beaten and perhaps even picked up a stone of her own to hit me with it. I will make Mr Koni, Sindi and Ntombi pay for this. I'm sure there is someone who doesn't fear Mr Koni and I'm also sure that

Ntombi can't hide forever, like I've said I've got eyes and ears everywhere and something tells me Sindi and her father know where Ntombi is. Perhaps they took her to a safe house for abused women. Ntombi isn't even a victim of abuse. A few slaps every now and then surely don't count as abuse. If she was present when my father hit my mother, she would have known what abuse it. Ntombi cries abuse for the smallest things. Now I'm starting to believe that she cried abuse when her stepmother was disciplining her.

Well when I find her I will just have to show her what abuse it. She can run, but she can't hide forever, not from me anyway. I'm just hoping to get out of this ordeal alive. My flesh failed me. I passed out soon after. I woke up in a strange place, it was a shack. At least I didn't die. I'm sure my friends or boss came to my rescue. My entire body was sore, from head to toe. I could not even move a single finger or lift my head. All I was starring at was the zinc roof I'm facing. It was rustic, but I'm just grateful to be safe, well at least I hope I'm

safe. I heard a sound which sounded like a door opening. I tried to turn my head but failed. What did those people do to me? The person finally looked at me. It was an old woman and she didn't look too happy. She dipped her cloth in a bowl and washed my face with it. The warmth of the cloth soothed my wounds.

Me: "Where am I?", I asked in a whisper. Old lady: "You are where you are not wanted. I don't want you here. I told my son that I didn't want to get involved, next thing my house will be burnt down

because I'm hiding a thug", she shouted in frustration and anger. Me: "Your son? Who wants your son?" Old lady: "You will ask him that when you see him. Tomorrow you are out of here.", she said and put more pressure while soothing my wounds. I heard the sound of the door again. I finally get to see "the son". I must say I'm not too pleased that he of all people saved my life. Now I will owe him more than I already do. He is a loan shark I borrowed money from and stopped paying him. It thought him not coming after me for his money meant he wiped my

debt off.

Me: "Ja Khusta", I said.

Khusta: "Don't "ja Khusta me, you dog. You thought you'd get away with my money? Do I look like the breadwinner at your house,

Bonga? I just give you free money?", he said flashing his gold covered teeth. I have forgotten how ugly this man is. Old Lady:

"Mkhuseli, take this thing out or tomorrow you will find him at the police station", she shouted while pointing at him. Khusta: "Oh

Mommy, people like him are what feed us. If you take him there, I won't get my money.", he said in a

pleading voice. How pathetic! Old lady: "I'm tired! Tomorrow night he must be out. One day of not knowing if the people will come burn my house was torture enough. You know what these people do to thieves and people who help thieves" Khusta:

"Tomorrow night this room will be clean. Old lady: "Good!"

Khusta: "Please make him something to eat so he'll have strength to leave tomorrow.", he begged. Old lady: "Mxm", she clicked her tongue and walked out. Khusta looked at me and smiled. He looked at me like I was

something good he has not had in a long while. I hope he is not having filthy thoughts. He's been to prison, so I wouldn't know if his sexuality changed in there. He rubbed his hands together and smiled. I admit, I was feeling better bit scared. Khusta: "Do you know the interest that you owe me for your loan? Now I have even saved your life. It means you are indebted to me for life", he smiled. Me: "I didn't ask you to save my life", my reply was followed by two hard slaps on my already sore cheeks.

Khusta: "Did you think I'd let you

die without paying me? Had you not owed me money, I'd have poured that petrol and lit you up myself, but I love money too much and you have my money. Me: "I will let Koni pay for..."

Khusta: "Hey, old men with knob sticks are the least of your problems. I said you owe me for my money and for saving your life. You will pay me for the rest of your life. I don't care how, but each week I want cold hard cash", he said cutting me short.

Me: "I don't have money. I'm a drug dealer, not a kingpin. You know these high profile thugs pay

us peanut!", I managed to shout. Khusta: "You know that I'm not a person who should be angered. I see me not asking for my money made you think I'm your friend. You want my money or I'll do much worse than this", he said while pressing my ribs. I couldn't help but let out a little cry. It is sore! He is right, I know he'll do worse. He'd torture me for days before killing me. I might be a man, but I can't stand pain. All of this is Ntombi's fault. Now I'm in deeper shit because of her. I will find her, make her pay and make her help me with this debt she put

me in. I don't care if she has to sell her organs, soul or body to do it, but do it she will. Khusta's mother came with food, she helped me sit up. I've never felt such excruciating pain by just trying to sit up. I'm sure something is broken. She fed me the maize porridge she made with such impatience. She'd fill my mouth before I even swallowed the first spoon of porridge. She really didn't want me here.

Khusta lived a bit far from my house, so it's highly unlikely that Koni and his thugs will know where I am. I can't go back to

my own house either. I'm sure they burnt it to the ground. I hope Ntombi is happy where she is because it won't last. Anger doesn't even begin to describe how I'm feeling. I could kill someone right now! I'm going to lose an income too because if I don't sell drugs for the boss, I'm out of the game. How will I pay Khusta thousands of rands each week when I'm not making money? I have to come up with a plan soon!

Ten

NTOMBI

A few week have gone by and I'm

still living with Mrs B and Zim comes home occasionally. Bonga did go to Zimkhitha to confront her about hiding me, apparently he suspects that she took me to one of those safe houses for abused women and children. Well he is not really wrong, Mrs B's house has been a safe house indeed. My situation has also forced Zim to stop coming to her mother's often because we don't know if Bonga might be following her every move. The only problem is that I can not explore the beautiful suburb at all because I fear that I might run into Bonga. He knows

a lot of people so if someone spotted me out and about, they would run to him and tell. Zim said Bonga looked like life has been treating him rough. She said that he even has bruises on his face and judging by the way he walked, his body seems to be in pain. I felt guilty when she told me about that because my mind thought of all reasons why he might be like that. Could he have been in a car accident? I would not be surprised because he likes to drink and drive. I also thought that maybe he was depressed and tried to kill himself. A part of me

felt sorry for him, so sorry that I wanted to go check on him. Mrs B and Zim used all their persuasion power to convince me not to. They were right, I can not go back because he will kill me. Knowing Bonga, he blames me for all his misfortunes. I have been at peace here at Mrs B's. One can even say that I am slightly happy. Mrs B spoils me rotten and because I have always been told that I do not deserve good things in life by my father's wife and boyfriend, I feel unworthy of her kindness. Mrs B is still my therapist but we have sessions

when she comes from work. She said she spotted a dodgy car outside her offices a few days, saying that it drove off when she got closer to it. I know it is Bonga. I'm sure he wants to see if he could get an opportunity to grab me on my way to my therapy sessions, little does he know that my therapist has opened her home to me. He wouldn't follow Mrs B home because he does not know that we have grown so close. I'm so thankful that I did not tell him that she is an old friend of my mother's or he would have known that I live with her.

Zim and her mother have a church gathering in Paarl, apparently it's a huge convention where all members of the Methodist Church in the Western Cape will come together in praise. They have been trying to convince me to go with, but I can't for various reasons. Firstly, I haven't been to church since my mother's funeral. Secondly, Bonga might see me. Thirdly, I don't really believe in this whole prayer and church business. I could see that Mrs B is trying her best to not add pressure on me, but I could see that this is important a lot to

her. I finally agreed to go and their eyes literally lit up. They promised that nothing would happen to me even if Bonga finds out about my whereabouts somehow and I trusted them. Mrs B bought me a beautiful blue dress. My curves have now started to show too. Zim drove to Paarl last night since. I think she holds an important role at her church. Mrs B and I got ready and I'm a nervous wreck. I'm sure people will notice that I'm an odd one out. They will see that I'm not used to the house of the Lord. Mrs B looked beautiful in

her church attire and I could see that she takes pride in wearing it. She was busy putting her essentials in her handbag while I stood by the window biting my nails, I don't usually do that but today it seemed like it was an old habit. I felt her hand on my shoulder, I turned to face her. Mrs B: "You can stay here if you don't want to go, Ntombi. I would love for you not to, but if you are not up to it, stay. If you want, I can stay with you", she said while brushing my arm. Me: "I'm just nervous, Ma. I can't even remember what the inside of a

church looks like. I want to go though and see people, I can't remember the last time I was with a crowd of people. Let's go, I want to hear you sing", my words left her laughing. She is such a beautiful woman. She's petite, her skin looks like it had been dipped in caramel. Mrs B: "Let's go then. Zim has been calling non stop. I need to buy you a phone, my baby so she could bother you as well", she said and we laughed. Me: "Thank you, Ma. Let's go before you miss out on all the good seats. I will sit at the back in the corner", she laughed

Mrs B: "Whenever you feel comfortable, just sit in a corner where I can still see you. I don't want you to disappear from my sight because it will be packed there.", she said with a look of concern. Me: "Ma!" Mrs B: "Don't dare Ma me. I'm overprotective and I'm not going to try to hide it. I can't wait to show the ladies my other beautiful child. When they ask say I'm your aunt, don't be explaining long stories to them. Just say I'm your mother's sister, unfortunately church ladies are nosy", she said and I laughed. Me: "I'll remember that" She

gave me a warm reassuring hug. Zim called again and we lied and said we are in the car when we haven't even left the house yet. Mrs B is great, but she never seems to finish on time. Just when you think she's done, she suddenly remembers something she still needs to do. I just sit and wait patiently but Zim doesn't have as much patience. We finally made it to the car and onto the round. She was playing gospel music all the way and I could not help but hum softly. There is just something that gospel music does to a person.

It's almost like it doesn't go to the ears, but straight to the core, the soul, one's being. We finally arrived and the number of cars and people outside make me feel a bit anxious. Bonga had locked me in the house so much that I don't know how to be with other people anymore. After Mrs B reassured me for the millionth time that all will be fine, we finally went inside. There was just red and blue clothing everywhere you looked. Zim came running to us in her blue church attire. She gave us both a tight hug. Her mother couldn't even say much

when Zim took me by my hand and let me through the crowd, to the front. Her second was just blue everywhere you looked, she's what her church calls a guilder. She introduced me to her friends with such excitement. I've never felt this important. Someone started a song and soon enough most people were in their places and singing along. Zim insisted that I sit next to her, I felt so odd. Everyone was in uniform. Nobody seemed to mind me though because the song was too good. Mrs B sat with the other women her age, who wore their red

jackets. The church service started and I was not really present. I somehow felt exposed in a way. There was a gentleman on the side of the men who wore red waistcoats and black suits who started the hymn "Siyakudumisa. I couldn't see him, but his voice was too magical. Soon everyone was singing. My mother used to love this hymn too. She didn't want anyone to make noise when Siyakudumisa Thixo was sung. She used to say that the hymn is a prayer and it's disrespectful to speak while it's being prayed. I could hear the

voices of others around me, but this particular gentleman's voice was the one that cut deep into my soul. Its as though the other voices were singing softly. I could see my mother in her church attire, singing along with her eyes shut. I moved with the soft rhythm of the hymn, left and right, it was as if I'm not in control of my body. I felt an arm wrap around my waist, not even that made me snap out of my weird state. I saw Mama lifting her arms in praise while she is singing. She looks so beautiful, so at peace. I felt tears roll down

my cheeks, yet I didn't open my eyes. I started to sing along softly, only moving my lips. I felt myself get lighter in a way. This gentleman's voice seemed to have gone a bit louder and I loved it. It was like he was singing for me, it was as though the more powerful he was in song the more my soul got moved. The song came to an end, even "Amen" sounded angelic. I opened my eyes when the Reverend spoke. I was back to reality and felt embarrassed. I wiped my tears off quickly, and realized that I was not the only one. I went to the toilets outside

to rinse my face. I felt better afterwards and went back inside. I could see Mrs B was concerned, but I smiled to show I'm okay. The service went on and the Reverend preached the word of God as if it was his last service. I loved the singing so much and how active everyone is when singing. The gentleman with the great voice started a song again, he came to the front, leading a group of other young men while they danced to the song in a circle. I finally got a chance to put a face to the voice. He was a handsome man, tall and dark

skinned, almost like mine. He was tall and was clearly working out too. I stopped looking at men in the house of God. I apologized to God for getting distracted. After a few hours the church service ended. Mrs B introduced me to as many people as she possibly could and so did Zim. The tall, dark and handsome man got into his car and left. We also got into our car, and Zim joined us while we just sat in it. Zim: "Did you enjoy the service?" Me: "I did.", I said with a smile. Mrs B: "I was worried when you were crying. The way you moved it was as though you'd

fall and I wanted to come shake you, but then I thought, who am I to interrupt the Holy Spirit when it's its work", she said with a smile. Zim: "I wouldn't have allowed her to fall, Ma. I've got her, always", I smiled. Me: "Thank you. I don't know how to explain what was happening to me. It was...it was as if I lost control over my body. I saw Mama singing Siyakudumisa in her uniform too, she looked like she was at peace. It was a strange moment" Mrs B: "It's God, my child." Zim: "Let me go to my car and go home. I love you guy. Drive

safely" Me: "Zim, I'm sorry that you can't see your mom much anymore out of fear of Bonga seeing you together and putting two and two together" Zim: "Girl, I'm no free because mom is overprotective of you. So I hope it lasts as long a possible", she and her mom both laughed. Mrs B: Just get out of my car before I drive off while you're in it", she said and we all laughed. Zim: "So the other guilders are asking when Ntombi will join the church, attend classes and be a guilder too. I told them they shouldn't worry, my recruitment game is

strong. We are yet to make one out of her", we both laughed. Mrs B: "Don't push, Zimkhitha. One fruitful service doesn't mean that Ntombi is ready for such a big step please, my baby.", she pleaded with Zim. Zim: "Oh, Mama and being serious. Ntombi knows that I'm not putting pressure on her. Let me go now, I gave people a lift so they are waiting for me. I love you guys", she gave me and her mother both kisses. Me: "I love you too" Mrs B: "I love you more. Zimmy, while you're here with us, your future mother in law called asking when

we are starting wedding plans. She..." Zim: "Bye", she said rushing out of the car before her mother could finish talking. Mrs B: "Hawu, this child. Zimkhitha!", she shoutef but Zim just waved while running to her car. Me: "She'll plan when she's ready, Ma. As long as her fiance is okay with the delay" Mrs B: "I hear you, Nana but her in laws are calling me non stop. Her future mother in law even accused me of not wanting my doctor daughter to marry her son. She needs to sort it out. I hate being accused of things I'm not guilty of.", she said with

frustration. I decided not to say more because she is right, Zim has to sort out her business. I want to talk to her and ask why she's delaying. I think she might have trust issues or fears commitment. Perhaps she was hurt by an ex. I didn't ask Mrs B about the man with the great voice. I feared she'd shout at me and say I've got unfinished business with Bonga but I'm already looking for a replacement. I'm not looking for replacement. The day I get Bonga off my back for good, will be the day that I swear off men. I don't trust any

man and I doubt that I ever will. I can't wait to dump Bonga and finally be free go move as I please. The first thing I'll do is apply for a certificate and ID. I have a feeling that my life will start falling into place afterwards. Today was a good day for my soul. I don't know whether it was the Holy Spirit Mrs B talks about but all I know is that I feel better spiritually, not healed just better than I did before the service. I'm glad that I didn't allow my fears to stop me from going. It was good to be with other people. We stopped for

takeaways and went home. I've been sleeping so much better too. Knowing that I won't find someone slapping me awake just because they are hungry. I wish I could say that my troubles are over just by leaving Bonga. It would have been had Bonga been a "normal" person, but he is not so I know he won't just let me go. He sees me as his "lifeline" in some sick way. I'll just enjoy the moment while it lasts because church was so full today, someone who knows him might have spotted him and can't wait to tell him. I will not think about that

now and make myself sad though. Today is a happy day and I'll hang on to this moment for the longest time possible because it'll be over someday when I'm forced to deal with reality. Mrs B has been wanting to take me to my maternal grandparents but I'm afraid they won't be accepting. I can't go home either because I'm sure I'm dead in my fathers eyes for what I did. I'll deal with Bonga and then get a job and study part time. I can't sponge off Mrs B forever I'm sure even her kindness will start to fade if she feels I'm taking advantage.

ELEVEN

Bonga

I'm still trying to heal some what after that terrible ordeal that could have been avoided. There are some stubborn wounds that refuse to heal but I can not afford to lay in bed all day when I have a debt to pay. I have been back on the street selling drugs to those who want it, mostly youth. The money that I have been making is just not enough. I need more but have no idea where to get it. I could go to other drug lords and offer my dealing

services, but that would be too risky because in this business you can only be loyal to one boss. Should one find out you have been selling drugs for others on their territory, a war might break out and I will not be one of the survivors of it. I have even thought of going into other forms of crime such as bombing ATM's or cash heists but I do not have the brain to plan such and do not have money to pay people to do it for me. What I could do is go around to hear if any of these big shot thugs are in need of extra hands for their big jobs. I have

tried asking my friends to help, but suddenly they all have problems of their own to deal with. Neither of them are even willing to take me in. I have been living in a dump with some addict cousin of mine. I could go back to the Eastern Cape to my extended family but that won't put food on my table. I have not been able to get back at Mr Koni for injuring me, but for now that is the last of my worries. I don't have money, no friends and a big debt hanging over me. My hustling has also made it impossible to look for Ntombi. It seems like she is not

going to come back. I miss her so much. I now know for real that I can not live without her. I'm still angry at her, but I need her. I will find a way to get to her.

Something tells me that the damn Doctor knows where she is. I suspect one of those homes for abused women.

Today is a usual day at the "office" for me. The merchandise that I had was selling quickly today. It's a good thing because if I go home with merchandise once again that no good cousin of mine will steal it, he tried it once and I'm not about to risk making

my boss lose trust in me. He already did not want me to deal when I'm hurt, but I'm sure he saw just how desperate I was for the money. I'm still sore, but time waits for no man. I was standing at my usual spot where my customers normally find me. A regular came to buy their usual, these drugs were killing these kids, but if they don't buy, I don't get paid so I can not feel pity for poor decisions. Sky came rubbing his hands and occasionally scratching his face, clearly needing a fix.

Sky: "My man", he said trying to shake my hand but I just looked at him without extending mine in a handshake.

Me: "I'm not touching those filthy hands", I said with disgust and he just laughed.

Sky: "I know something that you don't", he said with a smirk on his face.

Me: "Hey, just buy and piss the fuck off", I shouted at him. He laughed again and I suspect that he was already high.

Sky: "Word on the street is that you are looking for your goose.

What if I know where she is?", his words suddenly caught my attention.

Me: "You don't know anything. How the hell would someone like you know?"

Sky: "You forget that someone like me would walk to the ends of the world to get money for a fix. Well I walked to the end of the world yesterday and your goose was in some larny place with some old girl", he said and my heart started to beat fast. I grabbed him by his clothes.

Me: "Tell me where you saw her!", I shouted. He let himself out of my grip.

Sky: "Not so fast, friend. I want something extra for my information"

Me: "I can't do that. Do you want me to get killed? Anyway how do I know that your information is real? For all I know, you just trying your luck.

Sky: "Suit yourself. I'll take one bag of the good stuff", he said while rubbing his nose. He took out a few dirty notes of money.

I have no option but to take his dirty money because money is money. He gave me money and I gave him the tik he was craving for so badly. My instinct told me that he might really have seen Ntombi. He demanded extra drugs in exchange for what he has. I decided to give it to him. I will pay for it myself because I can not go back to my boss with a shortage of merchandise and cash. He will say I am stealing from him. I gave Sky his damn drugs and he told me where he saw Ntombi and this other old woman. He could not describe the

woman to me but managed to tell me where he saw her. I know the place because an old colleague from my security guard days works at that complex. What would Ntombi be doing there? I did not even waste any time. I got into a taxi heading straight to that complex. I finally arrived and I was in luck to find my old workmate on duty on that day. He was happy to see me and had it been under normal circumstances I would be too but I need some information from him. I told him that I am looking for my little sister who ran away from home.

I described Ntombi to him and he knew who I was talking about and judging by how fondly he talks about her, I suspect that he might have feelings for her. He told me that he could not give me more information about her in terms of the house number, telephone and such because he would be in trouble. He suggested that I go to the police and only then can he allow me in and take me to her. I was not about to go to no police. I asked who she is living with because I just wanted to be sure that she is safe. He told me not to worry, that she

could not be more safer. He said he was not suppose to tell me those details either but since I'm an old friend concerned about my little sister he would make an exception. He disclosed that Ntombi is living with Mrs Bam, a kind woman who works with those who need to talk to someone. I once suspected that therapist but then it did not make any sense for Ntombi to be cared for by rich people. Why would a woman bother with a nothing like Ntombi? Or could she have offered Ntombi a job as a live in domestic worker? I was so

confused. "I'm surprised your aunt did not tell you that your sister lives with her", the security added. Apparently Ntombi and Mrs Bam tell people that they are related. That could only mean that they have a closer relationship than just employer and employee. Could Mrs Bam be Ntombi's mom's aunt? Ntombi does not know much about her mother's family so it might just be possible. But if that was the case then why didn't Mrs Bam take Ntombi back home because my old friend here said Ntombi has not left. In fact he said she

was inside, but he can not let me in. he offered to contact her to ask if he could let me in but I said no, she might run again. which is true. If she knows that I'm aware of her whereabouts she will run again. I had to be smart about this. Make her come home on her own, but clearly I'll have to give her some motivation first. I thanked my old friend and left, promising to return with law officials to come get my unruly "little sister". I have a few favors to call in and good thing I did not waste those because now is the time to call in those favors

to give Ntombi some motivation to return home to me. I might even have to chase those squatters away from my mother's shack they were renting. I did not want to continue living there after my father killed my mother in that shack, but since I can't go back to my own house, it will have to do. I know Ntombi will turn it into a home too, she has a way of doing that. I will still make her pay for making those bastards hurt, but for now I need to get her home. She belongs to me, she will always belong to me.

NTOMBI

After that powerful church service a month ago, I have been going to church with Mrs B since then. I don't know how to describe what I feel when I am at church those few hours it feels as if someone was carrying my burdens for me. Mrs B says because God is doing just that, but He does not just do it when I am in church but He does so everyday. I think I am starting to see what she means. What are the odds that I would be treated by the daughter of my mother's best? Clearly there is something

far greater than what we can understand that is leading us. That power leads us to people and places that were meant to be our lives. Another thing I have learned from going to church is that God would not give you burdens that He thought you could not handle. I have also been dreaming about my mother more, I think it is because I have been thinking about her a lot.

Tonight Zim and I went to a youth church service. Tonight I'm going with Zim to a youth service. The Guilders will be leading the service. Mrs B is usually back by

3pm, but it was already 16:45 and she has not come back. It is not the first time she is late, but she usually calls to let me know and her phone is off. I called Zim and she said her mom probably ran into an old friend and went out for coffee. She told me to take money from the emergency cash jar, she will call a cab to pick me up. I agreed but I was so nervous. I have never went somewhere alone before, but at least I did not have to worry about Bonga seeing me. Zim called the house land line again to tell me that my taxi is waiting

outside. I had suddenly had a bad feeling. I could not explain it but my instinct just told me that something bad would happen. Like always I decided to ignore my gut feeling. I mean, what is the worst that could possibly happen at a church service? I set the alarm and made my way to the white car that stood in the driveway. The driver knew where to go since Zim told him. He was friendly and even asked for my number, but I was honest with him and told him that I had no phone. We arrived at the church, I paid, thanked him and said

goodbye before getting out of the car. I felt proud of myself for what I had just achieved, even if getting on a taxi alone is normal to most people, but to me it is not. Zim was already waiting at the door for me. I asked her to call her mom again, but she said that I should not worry her mom is fine. I thought the bad feeling would go away once I arrived at church because I thought it was just my nerves taking over, but it was not. I took a deep breath while Zim took me by hand and led me to the seats she kept for us, she likes sitting in front this one.

I scanned the building for the gentleman with the nice voice, but could not see him. Zim says he is from another congregation so chances of him coming to theirs is unlikely. She thought I have developed a love interest for him, but that was far from the truth. I have developed a love interest for his voice. I only saw him once, in fact I would not be able to identify him because I did not really get a chance to look at him. All I know is that he has a beautiful voice and that he is tall, dark and handsome. Zim says his name is Liyema Elephant. Strange

surname for a Xhosa man, but Zim said it is a common surname. We went inside and the service started. Just when I thought the church elders were great at preaching, the youth proved that they were a force to be reckoned with. The service was so powerful that I would occasionally lift up my arms in praise, that has never happened before. The preacher preached about love and how we as people, especially youth have the incorrect meaning of what love really is. He went on to tell us more about the love of Christ and how we will never be stripped off

that love. Mrs B once mentioned something similar. I sat and cried because I have been believing the incorrect meaning of love for years. I believed that love hurts, now suddenly I was hearing all the good things about love. That it is not suppose to hurt, that it is suppose to be kind and all other good things. Never in the few times I've gone to church has a preacher preached to my soul. The young preacher said that all who are ready to receive and accept the love that God has been giving us should come forward. I felt my feet move me

forward, it was as though I had no control over them. My soul needed to seek and know the never ending love this preacher was talking about. I knelt in front with all other young people who received the word of God tonight. The preacher and other young people prayed for us. It felt like my burdens had been lifted off my shoulders. It was in that moment that I opened myself up to discovering the love of Christ. The moment where I discovered real love. The service came to an end. Zim called a taxi to take me back home again. She

listened to her voice mails afterward. I stood beside her and noticed her face go pale. "Mama got hijacked on her way home, we have to rush to hospital as soon as possible", she said while running towards her car. I followed behind her hoping to hear that I heard incorrectly. Mrs B hijacked? We got into the car and sped off. Neither of us caring about whether or not Bonga has her car followed. How could such a spiritually fulfilling night end on such a bad note? I was looking forward to telling Mrs B about today's milestones that achieved,

the biggest one being accepting Christ. I took comfort in the fact that she was in hospital, it means she is still alive, perhaps hurt and most definitely shocked, but she still breathes or so I hope. I knew something was off, but a hijacking was the last thing I would have thought of. Zim and I were both silent, I'm guessing we are both confused and still in shock to hear such terrible news. I have read a lot of stories on hijacking from newspapers and how high hijacking and smash and grab crimes are in Cape Town, but when it hits close to home, it put

a different type of reality to it. A reality I would not wish anyone or their loved ones ever experience. To know that a person you love could be badly injured just for driving a car wanted by thugs makes me sick to my stomach. Mrs B is a strong woman though, I have full faith in her overcoming this.

TWELVE

Mrs B

I left work a bit later than usual today because I knew I would

have gone home to an empty house since Ntombi would be meeting Zim at church. I did not always mind going back to an empty house because Zim is at work most of the time, and she technically does not even live with me, but I have gotten used to having Ntombi around. She talks a lot for someone who claims to be shy. I guess she just needs to be comfortable around people. My child has even picked up some weight. Now she looks more like her mother. I still think that she needs to go back home, apologize to her father and tell him the

actual reason why she left home. She did not leave because she wanted to. Her step mother's actions drove the poor child out of her own home. I am sure her father will forgive her and deal with his wife. I hate people who are cruel to innocent children. Why claim to love a man when you can not love his children from another woman. I always wish that Ntombi could go home with me when I go to see my mother. That way I can introduce her to her grandparents. She does not seem ready for any of that even though I know it is what is best

for her. I have stopped saying it to her because I fear she will think I am tired of her. I also wish she could go lay a charge of domestic violence against that boy. It is the only way he will know that she does not fear him, but she refuses. I more than anyone understand how she is feeling. Abusers make you fear them so much that even in their absence, you feel caged. You feel like they are watching you. You think about all the bad things they might do when you rebel against them. But I have also come to learn from sessions I

have had with former abusers, that most are cowards. Most target helpless people and instill fear in them. One said he slapped his wife once, she did not wait for a second time because she opened a case against him. Of course he spent a few days in holding cells and was let free. Our justice system still do not protect women and children as it should. The patient said his wife forgave him, and he never again laid a hand on her because he was afraid of going to jail and be hit by other men on the inside. I think Bonga also needs to know that Ntombi is

not afraid of him, even if she has to act tough. I know that he is looking for her. He went to confront Zim at work, and I'm sure that car that I saw was him. I think he was hoping that Ntombi would attend our therapy sessions. There are so many things I wish Ntombi could do to bring peace into her life, but she needs to be the one to take action. I have planted a seed in her mind, it is up to her if she grows it so that her life can take a turn for the best. I also want her back at school next year. As soon as she is not afraid to go

places, I will take her to get her new documents done. The only place she goes to is church. I see a big difference in her behavior too and she has even prayed for us during our usual night prayer sessions at home. Zim and I have practically become strangers to each other because we do not want this Bonga boy to see us together, but we would both rather that be the case than see Ntombi go back to that life.

My mind was filled with all sorts of things while I laid in the hospital bed. The police have been asking me questions about the

hijacking and I gave them all the information that I remembered. One hears about these things but never think they could happen to you. Those thugs came from out of nowhere. The fact that my mind was all over the place did not help much either because I had left one of my back door unlocked. I was shocked that it happened while there were other cars on the road and no one came to help me. I guess they feared for their lives. Would too because they held gun against my head while demanding my car and all other valuables. I did not even try to

fight because nothing materialistic is worth my life. I have two girls I have to be a mother too. Zim acts like she does not need me all that much, but under that tough girl exterior is a soft heart. I also know that she has her fears about marriage because of my and her father's history. She has never admitted it, but a mother knows her child. I will wait until she opens up to me because she is a closed off person. Ntombi on the other hand needs me a lot more. So when those thugs told me to get out of the car and leave everything

that was in it, I did just that. It was only when they sped off with the car that another motorist came rushing to me, offering her help. She rushed me to the hospital and offered to call a family member. I gave her Zim's number, but her phone was off which was what I expected. I left a voice mail, so she'd know I am alive. Good thing Ntombi is with her, that way they get to come together, but such scares me because Bonga might still be following Zim. Just when I was about to over think the possibility of that happening my girls walked

in. they both ran to where I sat. the long, tight hugs I received made everything somewhat better. Zim checked my body for any bruises and wound, typical doctor, I guess. She is still in training, but to me she is a doctor already and many refer to her as one too. I told them what happened. Hijackings are a no shocker in Cape Town, but in certain suburbs they kind of are because they are known as "safe places". I pray to a living God, I said a silent prayer while it all happened and I knew that my God was shielding me and that is

why nothing happened to me. I was finally allowed to go home, and it could not happen fast enough. We once again compromised Ntombi's safety but that was the last thing on her mind. We arrived home and I was put on the couch, with a blanket over me and tea in hand before I knew it. Ntombi went to the kitchen to make something for us to eat.

Mrs B: "This hijacking should happen again if this is how I get to be treated", I joked and laughed alone, "Too soon?", I added.

Zim: "Way too soon. So much could have happened.", she said with anger.

Me: "But nothing happened. The car and all else can be replaced.

Ntombi, why are you so quiet, my love?", I said while looking at her. She was peeling something, my house was an open plan so I could see her in the kitchen while in the lounge.

Ntombi: "I had a bad feeling earlier on, Ma. I thought it was the nerves of having to travel on my own, but it clearly was not.

Now I just can not shake off the feeling that I am to blame for all

of this", she said softly and was crying. She tried to hide it, but Zim and I both noticed tears.

Zim: "Now that is crazy! Hijacking is very common, unfortunately so. I'm sorry to burst your bubble, sis but you do not have the power to control people's actions", she joked and Ntombi smiled.

Mrs B: "Perhaps your instinct was trying to warn you, but there was no way you would have know this would happen. Just hearing you say that breaks my heart. You made it sound as if you are cursed and all who get close to you are too. Stop that mentality,

Ntombikayise.", I said in a stern tone.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry, Ma. It was not my intention to make the situation more intense.", she said in whisper. I did not like being stern with her, but she can not possibly blame herself for something like this.

There was silence in the house. I would not say it was tension, but it had clearly been a long day for all of us. Zim told me that Ntombi has opened her heart more to building a relationship with God. I was happy to hear that, and I am sure had this incident not

happened Ntombi would have been excited about her new spiritual journey. I'm not sure if she will continue to attend church with us or if she will find another spiritual home. I at times feel like I am not doing enough for her, but I don't know what else to do to help her. Zim said it is because Ntombi has to meet me half way, she is trying that I know. My girl just needs more time. Ntombi excused herself. I thought it would be the perfect time to talk to Zim about her wedding plans, but she could once again not get away from me fast enough. She also

excused herself, saying she is going to shower since she will be spending the night here.

NTOMBI

I went to the bedroom and just sat on the bed, deep in thought. I'm not blaming myself for the hijacking because I really had no control over it. I just can not help but feel guilty though, it was as though Mrs B knew that I feel like I curse everyone with just my presence. I guess I have let it slip during one of our sessions. She advised that I embark on a journey of self love. How does one do that? I don't love myself

because I being out the worst in people by just existing. I know that soon even Mrs B and Zim will get tired of me. I try my best to not make a burden of myself by doing my bit around the house and obeying house rules, not that there are any but there are just common rules in every household. The journey I have decided to embark on, is one of spiritual health. If I can not love myself, I will give God's love a chance. I still feel empty inside, like there is a very dark hole in my soul. Yes, I laugh more now, but I can not shake the feeling of sadness off.

I don't want to go home because I am ashamed. In the rural area when you come from a city, you need to have something to show for it. I left a nobody and if I return I will still be that no body. I feel stuck. Mrs B's colleague has advised her to put me on anti depressants. She refused, saying that I am not depressed. I'm starting to think that I am. Mrs B believes that once all the burdens I have been carrying around all these years could fall from my shoulders, I will be well. From me not being able to heal from my mother's death, to my

family situation, to Bonga's saga. She believes I'm not depressed, but carrying too much emotional load. I will ask her to put me on anti depressants, maybe the void will go away. I do not wish to someday have suicidal thoughts and act on them again. Zim walked in looking for a dry towel in one of the wardrobes.

Me: "Zim, don't you want to marry your person?", she turned to face me quickly. She was not expecting the question. I'm sure she will tell me exactly where to get off.

Zim: "I love him, Ntombi.

Goodness I love him so much but

I...I'm so afraid.", she said and came to sit on the bed with me.

Me: "Scared of what?"

Zim: "What if he is like my father, in terms of being abusive? Mama said Tata was soft spoken and kind. Zweli is like that but what is a monster hides inside?", she said softly.

Me: "I read somewhere that there is a monster inside of all of us, that we all have a bad side. Difference is some act on their bad behavior a lot more than others."

Zim: "That does not take my worries away, Ntombi. I think that I even got the gun just in case he tries something.", her words left me concerned.

Me: "Did you tell him your fears?"

Zim: "Yeah but you know the "I would never lay a hand on you" speech. Maybe even he does not know that he is abusive, Ntombi. It seems like I'm surrounded by domestic violence, so why would it not happen to me?"

Me: "And my issues add on to your fear. Maybe you guys can try

therapy together, like those couple sessions"

Zim: "I have had enough of therapy to last me a lifetime because of the issues with my mom and dad. Zweli and I will sort this out, somehow. Don't worry because you already have so much on your plate. We have to get your things in order, Ntombi so that you can start varsity next year.", she said trying to turn the attention to me and away from here. "You can not constantly lock yourself in this house out of fear of what that pig might do. I know I'm the last one to talk

about fear, but yours is putting a complete standstill on your life.

Life waits for no one.

Me: "I know and you are right. I will work on my fears but you have too as well."

Zim: "Let me go shower"

She stood, took a towel and ran out of the bedroom. I have not met Zweli, but judging from what Zim tells me about him, he seems to be a good enough person. Mrs B loves her soon to be son in law to bits. I can't wait to meet him. I hope Zim gets over her fear. The phone ran non stop and I

stood to check why it is not being answered. Zim was still in the bathroom having a shower and Mrs B was fast asleep, I think they gave her something at the hospital. I don't usually answer the land line phone because I hate talking on the phone, but the person on the other side was not giving up. Perhaps it is the hospital trying to call Zim, but can't get hold of her on her private phone. I

Me: "Hello", I said as soon as I put it against my right ear. I hope my hello sounded friendly enough to the person.

Bonga: "I'm coming to get you tomorrow. Do not cross me, Ntombikayise. I don't want to do worse to your so called aunt. Are we clear?", he said in a cold tone. I froze. I could not speak, I held onto the phone so tightly. "Are we clear, Ntombikayise?", he asked once again.

Me: "Ye...yes", I said trying not to cry. It felt as if a heavy lump was stuck in my throat.

Bonga: "Good, girl. I will be waiting outside your complex but at a distance from morning, if you say anything or try to go to the police, someone in your new family

will die. If you are not out by noon tomorrow, I will call in favors again", he threatened before ending the call.

I still held the phone to my ear. I felt numb. So I was right when I said it was all my fault? I underestimated how gangster Bonga is. If he could orchestrate a hijacking, it means that he hangs out with some real thugs. Not the small town ones I thought. I put the phone down and went to where Mrs B was still sleeping. I do not even have to think about whether or not I will follow Bonga's instructions

because the price of me not following them was too big. I could lose the people who have shown me nothing but kindness. I'm sure Mrs B will be home tomorrow, so I have to make a plan to sneak out. If I tell her what is going on, she will tell me to go to the police. I'm too afraid of what Bonga might do to them. I knew that they were better off without me anyway. This life is just not for people like me. I deserve to be with people like Bonga. I slowly walked to the room and closed the door. I knelt down and prayed. My heart was

heavy with bad emotions. I prayed to God for strength to deal with Bonga once I go back home. I prayed that I return to changed man. Bonga's absence in my life since I left brought me nothing but peace. I got under the covers and let out a silent cry. I pretended to be asleep when Zim walked in., I can not tell her either. Bonga is clearly a dangerous man, he is also my burden and I refuse to make him their burden too. I will sneak out and go home with him. I wished that the sun would never rise because I do not want to go back

there when I have made so much progress. I do not want to be given a reason that might possibly make me angry at God again. Bonga would also never allow me to go to any church, especially after leaving him. I guess I indeed do belong to Bonga, and there is nothing I can do about it. I curse the day my path crossed with his.

THIRTEEN
NTOMBI

I cried silently almost all night until I eventually fell asleep. Zim was fast asleep so she did not hear me. I was not surprised though, her hours at the hospital are crazy, she also has her church commitments when she is off, she has to make time for her mother and partner too. No wonder she sleep like the dead. I also laid awake thinking about how I will sneak out of the house without Mrs B noticing.

Zim was not next to me when I woke up. I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face before going to help with

breakfast. I went to the kitchen to see if Zim was there, but was greeted with a note that read "I'm off to work, see you guys later. I love you" stuck on the fridge. I opened the fridge to take out eggs and make Mrs B's favorite omelet. Zim's note gave me an idea. I went to the lounge to take a paper and a pen to write a note for Mrs B. if I don't, she might think that something bad happened to me. I knew what I wanted to write but I could not get myself to put ink on paper. I started to note down exactly what is on my mind.

"Dear Ma,

Firstly thank you so much for all that you have done for me. You have shown me love by opening your house to me without expecting anything in return. You have helped me get a bit closer to God and taught me the importance of prayer in just the short amount of time I have been with you. If my father had married a woman like you after my mother's death, I surely would not have found myself without a place of belonging. No other woman beside the woman who gave birth to me has shown me

the love that you have. You were not even obligated to do all that you have done, yet you did anyway. That is why I write this letter with a heavy heart. I have decided to go back to Bonga. I thought that I could live without him, but I can't. I love him a lot and can not see a future without him. Thank you for everything, but life without him is just not the same. Please do not try to look for me. This is my choice, and I ask that you please respect it. Please thank Zim too. Had I not met her, I would not

have met you. I love the two of you so much. Goodbye."

That was all I managed to pen down. Part of my words being utter lies. I don't love Bonga, I don't want to go back to him, my life without him is complete, it is peaceful. But for the sake of the people that I love, I have to go back to him. Mrs B joined me, I hid the note in my gown pocket. She walked towards me and looked into my eyes. I could see the look of concern on her face. I remembered how terrible I looked when I looked in the mirror this

morning, my eyes were red and puffy from the crying.

Mrs B: "Ntombi, it seem this sinus is getting out of hand now", she said while cupping my face in her warm hands. I breathed a sigh of relief because she thinks my sinus is acting up again.

Me: "I know, Ma. But I think this time it might be something I ate at church that I might be allergic to", I lied.

Mrs B: "Let me go wake up Zim, maybe she will know what to do."

Me: "She had to leave early for work, Ma"

Mrs B: "Let me go call and make an appointment for you with my doctor then. I can not risk having a child die on me. Allergies can be deadly too. What would I be if I had to mourn one of my children?", she said while walking towards the phone. Mrs B has her dramatic moments.

Me: "I'm sure I would not have been able to breath had I ran the risk of this allergy killing me, Ma. I will take those allergy tablets that you got me, they always help"

Mrs B: "Yes, but you have never looked like that before. Swollen

eyes? I will not be told what to do either. I am taking you to a doctor whether you like it or not”
Me: “Okay, Ma”, I said. I act as if I get annoyed at her treating me like a child, well sometimes it can be annoying, I mostly enjoy it because I feel like no one ever gave me the chance to be a child after my mom died.

She went to call and made an appointment at noon. There is still plenty of time to do all that I need to like making breakfast, cleaning and sneaking out. Mrs B also talked about sorting things out with her insurance. I made

breakfast and we ate while watching the repeats of our favorite shows. There was a loud bang outside and Mrs B jumped up from her seat in fright. I stood to calm her down and told her it was nothing. I hate Bonga for doing this to her. She clearly is traumatized by what happened but tries to stay strong. She started crying when she realized that she had shown weakness in front of me. I held her tight and comforted her. I was not about to tell her to stop crying because she needed to let it all out. This is the first time she has shown any

form of reaction to the hijacking. She was trying to not break down, but she no longer was able to. A part of me even grateful that I was the one she trusts with her vulnerability, but the other part felt guilty because she would not have been like this had I not come to hide in her house. I made her camomile tea, she said it helps her calm down when she is stressed. She looks tired, I suspect lack of sleep. I would not be able to sleep if thugs had guns against my head, demanding my things, things that I worked hard for that they feel entitled

to. My hate for Bonga increased. The doctor gave her pills to calm her down, but Mrs B refused to drink them last night, saying she does not need them. She asked for them today and I gave them to her. I hate that I will hurt her after she had gone through such a terrible thing. I left her watching TV and went about doing minor chores like washing the dishes we ate in. the lady who cleans does not come in everyday anymore, which worked well for me. I went to bath and get ready to leave. My mind knew it was best that I leave, but my heart

wanted to stay. I left the note on the bed where Mrs B would be able to find it with ease. I left my clothes because Bonga would burn all the nice clothes that got from Sindi. I walked to the lounge seeing if I will find an opportunity to go without the lady of the house noticing. I found her asleep and hope that she will sleep for longer than she did last night. I looked at and a tear rolled down my cheek and more soon followed. I put my hand over my mouth to block any sound from coming from it and resulting in her waking up. I wiped my tears off and kissed

her forehead. She was in front of me but I missed her already. I looked around the house that had been home to me for the past few weeks. I was grateful to God for allowing me to find rest, even if it was just temporary. I can't believe that I am thanking Him, because usually I would be cursing God. It shows what a great impact Mrs B has on me. I will try to pray even when things are tough. It will not be easy, but I'm sure this too leads to a destination. I just pray that it is not a bad one, one where I end up hurting Bonga

out of hatred. I walked out of the house, locked it and threw my through the kitchen window, hoping it did not make to much noise. I walked to the complex's security area slowly. My body was feeling numb yet tired. The security who had developed a crush on me came out smiling, telling me that my brother is worried sick and he is waiting outside. He told me about how he and Bonga had known each other for years not. I did not say much. What can I say? He let me outside the complex area. I looked back like those prisoners on

movies who step out of prison gates for the first time on their release day. The only difference me and them is that I did not want to go because I am going straight to prison after this and be Bonga's prisoner. The security pointed to where my "brother" stood waiting for me. Bonga stood with a big smile on the other side of the road. He walked closer and I felt like vomiting. He thanked the security before giving me a tight hug, too tight.

Bonga: "Sisi, never do that to me again. I know I am too strict

sometimes but it is only because I love you", he said with "concern"
Security: "Ntombi, kids are out of hand now because their families allow them to get away with everything. Please be grateful that your brother loves you enough to discipline you when you are wrong. That is love and it will teach you respect so that when you are married your husband will appreciate you", he said while looking at me. I felt like slapping him.

Bonga: "These people wanted nothing to do with us when our mother dies, now they want to

play happy family?", he added to his lies.

Security: "I never thought the Bam's were so cruel. To leave your sister's kids to suffer while they live with the rich whites? You did well by taking your sister, brother"

Bonga: "Thank you, bro. Let us go, Ntombi. Thanks once again, man. I'm glad my little sister saw through them too. She always wanted to meet them, now she has decided to come home. I am not angry, Ntombi. Mama left you in my care and I will not go against her death wish."

The level of Bonga's lies was so high that I suspect he might have a PhD in manipulation and lying science, a qualification he alone knows where he got. To lie to his friend and say that I am his sister and that Mrs B was an aunt who abandoned us after our mom died was just sick. This man is sick and needs deliverance. We left to the taxi rank and got inside the taxi and it drove off. He said we arrived home, but it was not his old house. He apparently now lives in a shack because of me. He told me his entire story about Mr Koni almost

having him killed. I wish they had succeeded. I hated that I had such thoughts but no one would have missed him. Thinking about that night angered him. I know him by now and soon his anger was taken out on me. He slap me me a few times. I did now cry. He then hugged me while crying and said he was sorry and how much he missed me. He kissed me with his tobacco and alcohol mixture breath. I pushed him away but he said he missed me. He also blamed me for not being able to afford attracting other girls because all his money goes to his

loan. So he is willing to settle for boring me. He undressed himself and me, I don't know why I felt numb, I did not want this, but telling him that meant making him angry, and resulting in him hurting me. He did what he wanted finished, not bothered about my well being at all. He used a condom, I guess he does not want to get me pregnant because he knows I would lose that baby anyway. I was at least safe from whatever disease he might have, but I did not want to sleep with him. I'm doing it to keep the peace. His bad

scent clung to my skin and it made me sick.

Bonga: "You are still as stiff and boring in bed as ever. I don't even know why I bothered.", he said trying to breath normally again. That is why I just go get sex elsewhere. You are good for other things. You can thank your lucky stars that I love you enough to want to keep around. No man would stand being with a woman who in cold in bed, but it is time you learn", he said while laughing. He turned and looked the other side and fell asleep. I stood and that feeling of complete

emptiness came back. I took some water from the bucket in the "kitchen", and poured into the small plastic bucket that was at the corner of the shack. I washed Bonga's smell off my skin I had not had sex in a long time, so I was sore. The fact that he did not bother to prepare my body for it made it worse. I missed home so much. Bonga said I will help him pay his debt. I would if he allowed me to go find work and make money. He blames me for everything. I don't know how him going to cause chaos in another man's house is my fault. We all

know Mr Koni would do anything for his girls, perhaps even kill.

Now because of his foolishness, I have to stay with him in a shack that is not in the best condition. I knew reality would come for me, but I hoped it would not be this soon. I'm sure Mrs can not believe I left like that after all she has done for me. I'm sure she thinks I am a ungrateful person. I hope that someday I will be able to go apologize to her.

MRS B

I laid on the couch feeling a bit ashamed for breaking down in front of Ntombi like that. With all

she is going through, the last things she needs is to worry about me too. I got up and was still feeling tired. Perhaps I'm still shaken about the hijacking, but I doubt I need psychological help. It happened only yesterday, so it is normal to be jumpy. I went to Ntombi's room to tell her to get ready for her doctor's appointment. I called out her name while opening the door, the room is empty. I would have seen her had she been in the kitchen so I'm sure she is bathing. I knocked on the bathroom, but no response. I opened the door to

find the bathroom empty too. My heart started to beat faster because I know she can't be with Zim. I ran around each room in panic like a mad woman. Where is my child? I went to her room again to check if her clothes are there, all of it was. I looked around and found a letter on the bed. I read it and fell to the bed due to sadness. I called Zim's work and asked for her. I told her what happened.

Zim: "I'm sad too, Mama but we can't help Ntombi if she is not willing to do it too", her words left me more sad.

Me: "Don't speak as if you will never want to help her again, Zimkitha. This is a person who has had the wrong understanding of love and worth almost all her life. Don't you remember her telling us that she feels like she is not worthy of the love and kindness we showed her? She is broken. How could she not be with her life story being as it is?", I said while crying.

Zim: "I hear you, Mama but at the end you have to remember that Ntombi is an adult. If she could leave a note, it shows she was not forced to go. When she

someday decides to put an end to it all, she knows where to find us. I'm sorry, I know it is not what you want to hear, but it is the truth. I have to go now, it's busy here. I love you and see you later to talk about this", she said and ended the call.

The lack of understanding Zim has for this situation made my day even worse. I sometimes hate how she can use logic and is unable to connect emotionally to situations and emotions. I know that Ntombi is an adult in terms of the law, but emotionally she is still a scared young girl. One who

had been introduced to pain from an early age, it is all that she knows. This Bonga must have found a way to get to her. I would know because my late husband had his tricks too. I know what Ntombi is going through. I was a Ntombi once. Just when I thought she would have the courage to get him arrested this happens. His hold over her is much stronger than I thought. I do not even know where this boy lives. I'm sure he has punished her by now. The thought of it made me cry. She could be lying somewhere in a pool

of her own blood not being able to move. I called a cab to come pick me up. I went to get ready while waiting for it. I finished and got picked up. The security who is always friendly with me gave me attitude or am I mistaken. I decided not to worry about such now, I'm sure I'm just stressed. I went to the police station to open a case of assault on Bonga, but got told Ntombi is old enough to do it herself. What has become of society? Can't a mother do such on behalf of her child? They say they will not waste state resources only to have Ntombi

deny everything because had she wanted help she would have come herself. I felt helpless. I need to find her, and look her in the eyes while she tells me herself that it was her choice to go back. I can not be another person on the list of people who let her down. She needs to know she has other options. That boy had better not have hurt her or so help me. I hate abusers, I hate the power they have over their victims.

FOURTEEN

ZIM

I loved the idea of having another girl in the family, a sister but now Ntombi has chosen to go back to that pig. I just don't understand why she would do such to herself. He does not have anything new to offer. I love Ntombi but her weakness upsets me at times. How hard can going to the police and getting Bonga arrested be? I had the locks in my mother's house changed, just in case. Ntombi left her key, but one can never be too careful. What if her plan was to come into my mother's house and check out what she could steal and sell for

money? I don't like thinking the worst of her, but it is clear that her loyalties are with Bonga, not us. My mother has been telling me that I'm being insensitive and that I will never understand what Ntombi is going through because I have never been in a violent relationship. She is also determined to find Ntombi. She called the man who brought Ntombi to her house Mr Koni, and was sad to hear that they no longer lived next to his house. Mr Koni told her that Bonga is most probably hiding in the darkest corner of an informal settlement

and the chances of finding Ntombi are close to non. I have never seen my mother this heart broken, well I have but not over a stranger. She feels like she failed her late best friend.

I met up with my finance Zweli for lunch. Our work schedules are do not allow us to spend much time together. We make use of any gap we get. I was going on and on about the Ntombi situation and I could see that he was losing interest. I did not let that stop me. I continued to talk, I needed to vent.

Zweli: "Zimkhitha!", he said out loud and everyone looked at our table. He clenched his jaw and breathed out slowly while his eyes were closed.

Zim: "Did you have to speak so loudly? Now we have an audience.", I said in a frustrated whisper.

Zweli: "What was I to do uh? You keep going on about this Ntombi girl. We have our own issues to discuss, man", he said calmly.

Zim: "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to understand this entire situation with Ntombi. Why would

she go back?", my words left him sighing loudly. I'm annoying him.

Zweli: "Do not judge a situation you have never been in. you have never been in an abusive relationship. So how on earth would you know what the poor girl is going through?"

Zim: "Well I have not been in one yet, but you never know", I mumbled.

Zweli: "What is that suppose to mean? Do you seriously think that I would hit you? Have I given you reason to believe that? You have seen me when I am angry,

Zimkhitha. I don't even know why I keep explaining myself to you. I really want to make you my wife but this is beyond my control. You are quick to point out other people's shortcomings but no one can do the same to you because Zimkhitha Bam is always right."

Zim: "I don't think that we are ready for marriage. We have a lot of issues that we first need to sort out", I said and he gave me a look of disbelief.

Zweli: "You have issues to sort out. I have tried helping you, but you do not want my help. And yes, maybe we are not ready to get

married.", his words left me crushed.

Zim: "Okay! Marriage is overrated anyway. I'm not the makoti type who wakes up at 4am to make food for 20 in laws while they sit like kings and queens anyway"

Zweli: "You actually need to know your way around the kitchen to be able to make food in the first place and we both know you don't. I will not get into this petty fight with you. It is childish and you are looking for ways to insult me, so that the topic will shift from you to me."

Zim: "Just go and here take your ring with you", I said and took off the ring and put it in front of him. He laughed in disbelief.

Zweli: "So this is it? You are willing to throw what we have down the drain, just because you refuse to admit that you have issues? If you keep this up, you will end up all alone, Zimkhitha."

Zim: "Rather alone than be stressed by a man"

Zweli: "Wow!", he said before standing and leaving me alone.

I watched him walk away until he went out the door. What have I

done? I felt my heart break into a thousand pieces. I didn't expect him to just go like that. I agree that I'm not the easiest person to be with, but I'm trying my best. I have seen him angry and drunk and I have never once felt like I was in danger. He is the type to walk away when he is angry and return when he is calm so we can talk things through. I know this but deep down I sometimes tell myself that it is all an act. He was right in saying I'm quick to see the shortcomings of others but slow to see my own. Not so long ago I was telling

Ntombi that she should find ways to heal herself so that she will not "bleed" on others. Now I am "bleeding" on the man that I love. Zweli is a gentle man and so meek. Yes, he has moments where he loses his cool, but I have never seen him fight. I want to be his wife. I consider myself a feminist and believe in equal rights for men and women but I was willing to follow tradition for him because it is important to him. I had even observed while Ntombi cooked a few times to get an idea of what cooking is all about. I can now cook rice. I was willing to be the

perfect makoti for him. I can perhaps get away with being a modern makoti at his parent's house because they live in a modern urban area but not in his family homestead in rural eDutywa. There I have to be a old fashioned makoti. Cook on open fire, wake up early to make food for everyone, be on my feet all day, etc. now all of that is not going to happen and I know it is my fault. My finger felt strange without the ring. What will I tell people at church when they ask why I am not marrying? Now Mama will stress about me too as

though she does not have enough on her plate already. She is also afraid of driving now, which is understandable after the hijacking. I settled the bill and left. I sat in my car and started to cry. I would rather let it all out now than lose it in front of other people. I don't like showing weakness. It took me six months after being in a relationship with Zweli to let him in on my family past issues and I cried too. It felt good, yet foreign. I am not afraid of being vulnerable with him because he makes me feel safe. I held on to the steering

wheel and thought of what the next possible step to fixing this might be. I decided to try therapy again. When I did it with my mom it was to mend our relationship after she shot my father. I did not even know that Zweli would be a part of my life then. So I did not know that this might affect my relationships too. I made an appointment with a highly recommended therapist. I don't want to lose my man. I hope me doing this will prove that to him. I don't usually feel the need to prove anything to anyone, but I love him. I can't call now

and tell him that I will go to therapy either because he will think it is a plan to get him back, not that we have broken up or anything. I want to be Mrs Bam-Mahambehlala. I am willing to go the extra mile to make that happen. I will not tell my mom about this. I will fix it before she can even notice anything. I don't just give up easily. I refuse to be a prisoner of my past, I simply refuse!

NTOMBI

All I have been doing lately is cry. This place where Bonga found a back room shack for us in Delft is

not good. Drinking, smoking and fighting seems to be a norm here. I would rather be at the old house, but Bonga fears going back because I apparently told Mr Koni to have him killed. He has been giving undisclosed money to his loan shark every week. He keeps saying that soon I will have to help him. I get a cold chill down my spine whenever he says it, perhaps it is the tone in which he says it in. What if he is planning on killing me and sell my organs on the black market? Maybe I am letting my imagination run too wild but I am

sure what he wants me to do is crime related. What if he wants me to be a drug mule? I saw how that lady had fake dreadlocks trying to smuggle drugs on the news and read about girls swallowing drug filled condoms. I shudder at the thought of Bonga making me do such. I have not stopped praying and I miss church. Bonga tried to sleep with me again, but he could not get an erection. I believed that it was the power of prayer. Him not being able to get it up was my fault, like all else that is wrong in his life is. He accused me of

bewitching him. Saying that I put something in my womanhood and it took effect when he slept with me. I got punished for that too. Yesterday a man was dragging his girlfriend from a tavern. Her thigh was bloody because it was rubbing against the tar road. She was apologizing non stop but he would not stop. So many community members just stood looking, even men. I cried when I saw how society was failing women. I'm sure even our landlord hears when Bonga hits me but does not even call the police. Is it even fair of me to

expect them to call the cops when I myself fail to do it for myself? Who exactly is suppose to stand up for abused women? Should it be the woman or should it be her community? We are so afraid of leaving these men because we fear what they might do should they find us. Is it okay for other men to watch while another man hits his wife and just say "what is between two people should remain between them"? I know that Mrs B was willing to help me but at what cost? She nearly paid with her life not so long ago. I'm keeping my distance from her

to keep her safe. Does that mean that I am failing myself? Did I fail that woman from yesterday by not stopping the brutality? I feel so helpless. Unable to help myself and those in the same situation as me.

I was sitting deep in thought when Bonga walked in. he walked in smiling saying that he sold all his stock and was about to go get more from his boss. I asked him how he managed to organise a hijacking. He told me not to concern myself with the details, all I need to know is that he might not be a big time gangster,

but he will find me even when I run to America. I think he needs some traditional ritual to cleanse himself this one. A trip to his extended family in the Eastern Cape will do him good. Problem is he is not really a fan of them and he would die before leaving me alone. I would not be surprised if I see a picture of him on Khumbul'Ekhaya someday. He seemed so joyful today, he even brought me a chocolate, those cheap ones that taste like they coated them in cooking oil. I know I sound snobbish but Mrs B has spoiled me with the good stuff.

Bonga: "Don't cook, I will bring braai meat.", he said with a smile.

Ntombi: "Okay. I will cook anyway, just in case your happy bubble bursts and you decide not to buy the meat. We both know you will breath fire when you don't find food on the table.", I said bravely. I have moments when I just don't think before talking. I know better than to say things that make me sound "cheeky" as he would put it.

Bonga: "Don't be like that, Ntombi. I said I will buy meat so what is your problem? Stop making me out to be a damn

monster dammit", he said with frustration.

Ntombi: "Okay"

Bonga: "So remember when you said you'd help me financially?", he said in a soft voice. Is boy being serious?

Ntombi: "You told me I should. So what will you finally allow me to go look for a domestic worker job in town?"

Bonga: "Even better! A friend of mine told me that some fool came to their agency to look for a woman to carry his child", he said.

Ntombi: "Okay", I said wanting him to finish talking.

Bonga: "Apparently he has an egg donor and wants to combine his semen with those eggs to form a child"

Ntombi: "You mean surrogacy?"

Bonga: "Don't try to be smart with me", he said pointing his finger at me. "But yes that"

Ntombi: "So you want me to wait until his baby is born so I can be a nanny for it?"

Bonga: "Dammit, Ntombi must you ruin everything. It is your smart ass mouth that makes me

lose my damn cool all the damn time. Just wait until I finish then open your big mouth."

Ntombi: "Okay", I said softly. I don't want to upset him anyway.

Bonaga: "This friend says there is a lack of surrogate mothers in South Africa, especially black ones and this man wants a black woman to carry his baby.

Apparently he will pay for all her medical costs and will give her money she earns at her jobs for the time away from work. So, I was thinking why can't that woman be you", he said with excitement. Is he being for real?

Ntombi: "Whatever you are smoking is making you crazy, stop smoking...", I did not finish my sentence because he grabbed me by my afro puff so painfully.

Bonga: "You got me into this damn mess, and you will help me get out because I don't want to die. You will do this whether you like it or not or else I will kill that mind doctor lady and then you.", he said and let go of my hair.

Ntombi: "You forget that I can't carry any babies to term. I might have a miscarriage soon after that baby is put in my womb. If you said I should donate eggs

then we would have been able to do it, but not this."

Bonga: "Well this is just a scam."

Ntombi: "Had you done your homework you'd have known that this thing is protected with a lot of laws. I need to have given birth to a live baby at least once. I need to have a clean medical bill and I will sure need a non damaged womb. You damaged mine remember. That man's doctor will realize it. I know that you are cruel, but to want to con a man who wants a baby is just evil.", he grabbed me by my shirt.

Bonga: "I don't care about a damn fool who can not get a girlfriend and make her pregnant. Like I have said, do not worry about the law, some of us know a way around it. I will call in some favours"

Ntombi: "Well call in those favours to give you money to help you with your debt. I will not do it", I said bravely. I was scared but I was not about to ruin some man who just wants to be a dad's life.

Bonga: "You think you are smart. I see you have gotten snobbish behaviour from your so called family. Well it is either you do this

or you go stand in the streets and sell your body. Choose, Ntombi are you going to be a con artist or a prostitute. There is not in between.", he said with a smirk. I spat in his face.

He slapped me once and was about to do more when he stopped himself. He brushed my face with his fingers and said that I need to look decent for whichever job I will choose to do to pay "our" debt. I hated him. All of me just hated Bonga. I felt trapped. Had I not feared for what he might do to the woman I have grown to love, I would

have run away. I would have gone to the streets. I would rather sleep under a flooded bridge than here. I can't even think of going to my mother's parents because I would be putting them in danger too.

Bonga left and said he will come back to hear what my answer is. With all these favours he keeps calling in, he can't get a single one to help with his debt? Where are all his so called friends in his time of trouble? How will he go around the strict laws of surrogacy? Is he so cruel as to let me get pregnant knowing I will lose the

child? Where on earth will he find a child that will pose as mine? I don't even work, so what salary of mine will this man have to replace on my "time off work"? How will I pass all the tests that need to be done? The psychological tests, the physical tests, etc? Bonga is dumb. Dumb and dumb! There is no way that he will pull this off. I will also not sell my body. I will cut off any strange man's penis who wants to put it inside of me. Who gives the person they supposedly love such options? Either way it will be like selling my soul to the devil. Bonga hastes

me. If I was not sure of that, I am now. I wish I had never ran to Mrs B's that way we'd still be at the old house and he would not have had this debt. I can't ever seem to make the right choices.

FIFTEEN

Bonga

I have been a busy man lately. From getting Wayne in on my plan, to getting Ntombi an ID to borrowing a child. Ntombi thinks that I am too dumb to pull this off. I have been on the other side

of the law for years so I have learned a thing or two from the streets. Wayne did not want to be in on it. Claiming that his religion does not allow him too. So I did what I could because no one gets in the way of my things. No one is perfect. I followed Wayne and discovered that he does not only have one mistress but two and they are men. Wayne Pie is an "after nine", a man who sleeps with other men while married to a woman. I got proof and showed it to him. Poor guy looked like air had been punched out of him. I asked him if his religion allowed

him to cheat, especially with another man and that was when I started to hear the "I beg you, don't tell my wife. I will do anything that you want" speech. My favorite line being the "everything you want" because it meant that he was desperate to keep his infidelity a secret. He should never have complained to me about this man who is "picky" when it comes to the woman he wishes would carry his child. That is the other thing that has got me thinking too much. I'm trying to wrap my mind around the reason why a man, a black one at

that would want a stranger to carry his child. Our Forefathers had multiple wives and therefore many children. How has the African man gone from such to begging a woman to get pregnant for him? Wayne mentioned that it is a businessman and so I assume that he is well of money wise.

Such men usually have woman fall pregnant for them for free. Now he wants to go pay doctors and some woman to get pregnant for him. Maybe something is wrong with his manhood. That made me think about my own problem. I can't seem to be able to make my

machine work. I thought it is the lack of beauty in Ntombi that caused it, but I got a nice chick last weekend but still nothing happened. I think Ntombi might be using muti on me. My manhood losing its power will have to wait for now though. I will also stop trying to think of reasons why that man is wasting his money and take advantage of it. What I am sure of though is that his ancestors must be turning in their grave for his inability to find a woman and make her pregnant naturally?

My phone rang while I was busy serving a customer his usual drug. It is Wayne.

Bonga: "What?"

Wayne: "Well I was able to use his desperation to have a black surrogate to your advantage.", he said sounding like he had committed the worst possible crime.

Bonga: "Good man. I knew you would go over and beyond what I expect of you", I said with a smile.

Wayne: "Not that I have much of a choice. So when will I get the pictures of...of you know..."

Bonga: "You cheating on your wife with multiple woman?", I asked and laughed. "You will get them the day my volunteer is chosen to be the surrogate mother.", I added. There was silence on the other side of the line.

Wayne: "That is out of my control, B. he will choose who he wants based on the medical record of the woman and whether he thinks she is suitable to carry his baby", he said with anger.

Bonga: "You will have to make sure that he chooses her. Make her sound like the perfect candidate and also ensure that her medical records are excellent"

Wayne: "I don't have the power to do such at my work. Those are confidential files between the doctor and the parties involved dammit!", he shouted.

Bonga: "Then I will just have to leak the confidential "files" that I have on you to your wife and family.". I said calmly,

Wayne: "Dammit, fine! But when I have done as you want, I want all

the proof.", he said calmly but I could still hear the anger in his voice.

This thing of Wayne being a closet gay made me sick. I don't have a problem with those people but to know that he has been like that and hiding it is creepy. He is not a friend but rather an acquaintance. I meet all types of people in the hang out spots. Wayne will learn to control his alcohol because he started talking about his job while drunk. I would not have blackmailed him had he not opened his big mouth.

I sipped on the last bit of my beer and stood up heading home. I saw Ntombi approach, she is also going home. She started walking faster when she realized that I saw her. Was she trying to run away again? I pinned her against the wall as soon as we entered the house. Our landlord was handing her clothes and it seemed as if she wanted to say something. I asked if she has a problem, she said no and quickly walked into her house. I fixed my attention back on Ntombi.

Bonga: "Were you trying to run away again? Should I call my

friends and tell them to finish that job and kill that mind doctor?", I said and tightened my grip around her upper arm. I could see that she was in pain.

Ntombi: "I was at the police station", she said softly.

Bonga: "What?", I said while taking out my pocket knife. She was shaking.

Ntombi: "I went there to find out about the cleaning job I saw on the newspaper, not to talk about you", she said quickly, tears forming in her eyes while standing against the wall. I put the knife

back in my pocket and could see her breathing out in relief.

Bonga: "I told you that I don't want jobs that will pay a small amount. I have decided that you will be a fake surrogate."

Ntombi: "That won't work. I won't hurt myself by getting pregnant knowing I will lose the child. I would also be hurting some innocent man.", she said and cried.

Bonga: "The well being of another man should be the last thing on your mind. You doing this is in the best interest of me, your man so

you worry about my well being.
Don't worry, baby. This will all just be an act. Even if you could carry the child, you would not have been related to it anyway. That man has eggs from another woman.". she looked at me like I was the dumbest person she has ever seen.

Ntombi: "He will see that I am trying to con him. What you are doing is sending me straight to jail"

Bonga: "Oh stop with the drama, you won't go there. This man is desperate. He would do anything for a child".

Ntombi: "Who gives you such private information about this man, Bonga? Him being desperate does not mean he is stupid."

Bonga: "Desperate people are willing to do things they normally would not, sometimes even bend a few laws"

Ntombi: "Surrogates don't get paid, I read it somewhere. The person only covers their medical bills and..."

Bonga: "Did you not hear what I said about desperation? Leave it to me.", I said with a smile.

Wayne called again and it proved just how much he wants to keep his dirty secret. He works as a recruiter at a surrogacy agency. He finds candidates, does the screening, case management and also works with legal, gives support to parties and also works with counselors, so creating a fake file for Ntombi to make her seem like the perfect surrogate is not that difficult. He will have to break many rules but I don't care. He also managed to get a professional at the surrogacy clinic on his side. Apparently the doctor is a gambler so would do

anything for an extra buck. Wayne even offered to pay the man from his own pocket. I smiled all through the phone call. I love the power I have over Ntombi and Wayne a little too much too admit. To have people dance at your tune is amazing, now we also have a doctor on our side. Wayne went on about how the man and Ntombi must meet so that he could get more information on her and about her. He also stated that they need to sign an agreement should be approved by the high court. I still wonder why this man is going through all this

pain for a damn child? The man will be making use of the services offered at the surrogacy clinic Wayne works in for sure and that is music to my ears. Wayne said he also seems convinced about Ntombi but will only make a decision once they meet. Now I have to prepare Ntombi and teach her how to lie before her meeting with this man. Now that will be a mission all on its own. She is terrible at lying. Good things he only wants to see her next week.

NTOMBI

A week has gone by since Bonga heard that he could actually pull

this off. I can't help but think that something will go wrong and I will end up in a dark cell never to see sunlight again. Bonga does not care at all. He does not care about me and he sure as hell does not care about the man he wants to con. This man just wants a child. Maybe he had a wife and she died and before she died she froze her eggs and now he wants to have a child with her as a reminder. What is I am right? That means I would be playing with a broken man's feelings and hurt him all over again. The law states clearly that a surrogate

should not be paid. Bonga can not seem to get that through his thick, dumb skull. If this man offers me money, we might both get into trouble with the law because it is not legal. Bonga told me what to say to seem like the perfect candidate for this.

Apparently I have already gone for medical check up and everything is good. Where does he know people who do this from? Aren't these people afraid to lose their jobs? I memorized the lies well but I was still unsure of it all. That day when I went to the police station for a job I was

tempted to open a case but then got the image of Mrs B breaking down in front of me and realized that next time she would not just cry, she will die and I could not risk it.

Today is the day I will meet this gentleman who wants a surrogate. I hope there is something about me that he does not like and then choose to go for someone else, surely there should be better options out there. I could not even eat and Bonga was asking me questions to check if I remember what he told me to say. I don't struggle with

remembering things but things might be different when I am before the guy. Bonga dropped me off at some place and introduced me to a man named Wayne. He told me that Wayne would ensure that things go well. We walked in and headed to what I think is Wayne's office. He kept on telling me to calm down or the man would see right through me. Could he be Bonga's inside man? He looks so decent. Why would the likes of him associate himself with the likes of Bonga? He has a ring on too so meaning he is a family man. Looks can indeed be deceiving. We

stepped inside and a tall man stood in the corner of the white painted office looking out of the window. He seemed to have been in deep thought because he quickly snapped out of his thinking state when Wayne spoke. He turned to look at me and smiled. He looks familiar but I just don't know where I have seen him before. Maybe he has one of those common faces but when I got a closer look I realized that there is no way such a handsome looking man had a common face. His skin is smooth, his lips not too big, the upper lip was a bit dark and the

bottom one a shade of pink, but not that pink that indicates that a person drinks too much strong drinks like those of Bonga's that look like a burn wound. His was perfectly blended with the color of his skin, clearly natural. He must be working out too because he did not look like a man who was neglecting his body like Bonga who has a beer belly. Why am I comparing this beautiful man to Bonga? How could I insult him and his parents like that? He had his arm stretched out and his lips were moving but I could not hear anything. Wayne tapped me on my

shoulder and I snapped out of it. I awkwardly shook the hand before me and smiled. His smile had faded though. He looks so intense. He introduced himself as Liyema Elephant. I know that name. He is the gentleman who goes to Zim's church but not the same congregation. With so many beautiful youth at church, why does he not choose a wife to give him kids there? Had Zim been single I might even have nominated her, not that love works like that but still. He does not smile much and looks so serious. Wayne told us to take a seat and

Mr Elephant first offered me a seat. He sat down only after he made sure that I was seated properly. Bonga throws chairs at me, he does not offer me seat. There I go again comparing them. I think had I not been so put off by love and men I would have been smitten by now but I know that men are pigs so I'm sure even he has a pig like behavior under that handsomeness and gentleman manners. I snapped out of my admiring state and focused at the business at hand. I was not about to tell him that we have

mutual people from his church. I'm not even sure the knows the Bam's that well. He started to speak and his voice had such command. I'm sure I would feel his presence in a crowd this one. The meeting proceeded and he asked me a lot of questions. Wayne went on about how he personally made sure to choose me because I am the best person for this. Apparently I'm psychologically fit and physically healthy and strong to carry a child. I felt a pain in my heart when he said that because I wish nothing more than to be fit

and healthy enough to carry a child of my own someday. All of this is going against what God would want, especially because I am doing this to a man who is a believer. I 'm sure he said a prayer before coming here asking that I be the one to carry his child. When I heard that he has been looking for a surrogate for a year now, my heart broke. Wayne was such an actor. Had I not known any better, I would have believed him. The man even showed Mr Elephant a picture of my three year old son. Mr Elephant looked at the picture

and smiled. I answered his questions with nothing but lies, the only truth I told him was my name. It seemed as though he had asked all his questions. He took my file again and looked at it. Liyema: "Uhm...So far I am happy. You meet all the requirements of what I want from a surrogate. How do you feel about this?", he asked and looked at me. I opened my mouth but no words escaped it. He is the first person to ask me how I feel about this whole thing and I wish I could tell him the truth,

the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Ntombi: "Uhm..."

Wayne: "She wants to help people such as yourself. That is why she is here", he said and let out a weird laugh.

Liyema: "How do you feel about this? You might have a child but you have never carried one for another person", he said still looking at me. It was as if he did not hear a word Wayne said. I looked at Wayne who was giving me the 'don't you dare tell the truth' look.

Ntombi: "I want to do this, Mr Elephant. I know the joy a child brings to a parent and it would bring me great joy to be able to gift you and others after you with such a gift", I said with a stiff smile.

Liyema: "You sound like you are reading a script or something. Had I not known better I would think it was all rehearsed", he joked and Wayne laughed so loudly.

Wayne: "So after all these months, I think Ntombi is a perfect fit. Don't you?"

Liyema: "Well I like what I see on her medical records, she is clearly healthy enough to carry a child. She also seems stable psychologically. She answered all my questions satisfactory and this agency has a good reputation and I hear you have helped many people find the perfect surrogate. Now we can give the lady a chance to ask questions.", he said looking at me. Am I this lady he talks about?

Wayne: "We deliver only the best.", he smiled.

Ntombi: "If you choose me, what happens next?"

Liyema: "Well Wayne says he has had the legal people talk to you and discuss the contract with you. It is basically just to avoid any complications. You will know that it touches on what will happen. I have an egg donor just so that you will not have any genetic link to the child. The agreement is within the law therefore it was approved by the court. All we need to do is talk about it and sign should we both be happy."

Wayne: "So she is it?"

Liyema: "Yeah, I like her energy. So why not?", he said still with a

serious look. Wayne smile as though he had won the lotto.

Wayne: "Let us get the ball rolling then. There is a baby to be made", he joked and laughed alone.

Liyema: "There is another thing. It is not on the contract but I would really like it to happen.

There is hormonal treatments you need to take first, so before that I want to ask that you please follow clean eating meal plan and since you will be living with me for the duration I will join you"

Ntombi: "Live with you?", I looked with him confused.

Liyema: "You did not talk about that part of the agreement with her? I know that you are worried about your child since you are a single mom but..."

Wayne: he lives with the grandma in the Eastern Cape, he'll be fine.

Miss Poti, Mr Elephant just wants it to be easier on you both when you need to go see the doctor and such that way you won't have to travel all the way from the township to town all the time. We discussed, she was so nervous poor thing must have

forgotten.", he laughed alone once again.

We sat and spoke for more than three hours. This was all just too much for me. Liyema explained it all step by step but it was still too much. I apparently will be put on birth control pills first for about two week. Why when the point is to get pregnant? My head was spinning and I felt like I was going to burst a vein.

Healthy eating? I have never been on such a thing. I can't do this. It will all backfire, I can feel it. I asked to go over the agreement again and I thought

Mr Elephant will get angry and tell me to keep my womb he will find another but he was understanding. He was going to compensate me weekly since Wayne told him I got paid weekly for loss of income so I can continue sending money home to my "child". I felt so bad. To know that the money will go to Bonga each month made me sick. It was not even so much money to cover his stupid debt anyway This man does not deserve this. I can't do it. After many hours we finally went our separate ways. Bonga could not wait to hear about it. I

told him that I won't do it. He dialed a number on his phone and held it against my ear. A soft voice answered, it was Mrs B's. She kept on saying "hello" until she ended the call. Tears flew down my cheeks. He told me to choose between the stranger with money or Mrs B, he knew where my loyalties would lie. I missed her so much and hearing her voice made it worse. I asked Bonga what would happen if I really got pregnant?

"Your womb would get rid o that thing even before you know it is there", he answered jokingly.. so

he does not care about the hurt this might cause me physically, mentally, spiritually or emotionally. He did not care that I would be staying at the man's house. He was glad to hear that there is an entire process to go through before the embryo is actually put in my womb because it mean more money before I even get pregnant. Mr Elephant said he will compensate me even while I undergo this treatment before pregnancy. I felt numb and dumb. It suddenly felt is if I never read up on this surrogacy thing. At least I will get a break from

Bonga because I said I have no family this side. I'm at Bomga's mercy and all I can do now is sit and watch while all this happens. Wayne must be well connected in this industry of theirs and there must be more corrupt ones like him. Bomga must have done huge favors for these people for them to risk so much for someone who does not pay them. For all I know this Liyema is also breaking some laws to have this happen because he has just met me. Should he not gather his own information about me outside of that which Wayne provided? Or perhaps the poor

man really is just desperate for a child. He says he is not married nor does he live with a woman. He lives alone. So why would he want to bring a child to a home without a mother? Can a child be happy with just her father and not knowing who her mother is? What if he marries and gets a cruel wife that will mistreat the child? I snapped out of my question filled thoughts when it hit me that there would be no child. I still don't think Bonga and his partners in crime have thought this through. I feel like I'm

selling my body anyway even if it is not through sex.

SIXTEEN

LIYEMA

I think I have made the right decision regarding the choice of surrogate mother. Many have told me that I am racist for wanting the woman to be black and not any other race. I'm not racist, a black woman is just my preference. With the low amount of surrogates who are black in South Africa, it was not easy to find someone right. I have been to many agencies and even tried

finding relatives to do it but I was just not lucky. When Wayne said that he has the perfect candidate, I thought it was from a different race and to be honest I was willing to settle even for that. I'm a man who wants to become a dad without the drama of having to deal with a baby mama. Baby mama is actually not my most favorite word to use but it is the word most understand better when a man refer to the mother of his child. Many have asked me why I choose to go the surrogacy route when I could just get a girl to love and have

children with her. I have my reasons but like I have said, I just do not want drama as far as custody and such. I also made sure that I find my own egg donor so that the surrogate will not feel any ties to the kid and want to fight me for rights to be in my child's life. If I were to use the surrogates eggs, by law she is within right to want to be a part of her child's life withing the first 60 days after the baby is born. I do not want that. I liked Ntombi from the second Wayne showed me her profile. It seems as though she has come at just

the perfect time. She is a beautiful woman too. Not much of a talker but smiles a lot. She is the perfect picture of a natural African woman. Not a single trace of makeup, no weave and her hair seem to be free of straightening chemicals such as relaxers. Our skin tones are almost the same but she is a shade lighter than me. Has the thickest brows have ever seen, the type woman would pay thousand to have these days. I think I have seen her somewhere, perhaps we have passed each other at the mall or something. I come from a modern

family but I have a very traditional father. I still do not know how he and my mother managed to stay together for so long. They are two too different. My mother is a fashion loving woman who talks a lot and is not much into tradition and my father is not bothered by the next trends and he is a bit introverted. He thinks that I am going against all of our cultural beliefs by doing this surrogacy thing. My mother on the other hand has been more supportive. I admit that I do not not like being in her presence often because she get be

too much sometimes but I appreciate her support. I have not shared this journey I will begin soon with my church either. I'm just not ready to hear that this is against God's teaching. I have told a close friend about it and he tried to understand but can't, all I appreciate is the fact that he does not judge me. He knows my history with women, so he knows why I don't want a woman in my life just yet. I'm ready for a child though, those I have told about this like my brother has been telling me to adopt but they don't understand

that I want my own. So much so that I had my semen frozen when I was 25 years old just in case something happened that might have made them weaker over the years. Some call what I did and what I am about to do crazy but it works for me. I will give my child all the love and attention that they need. I can provide for him/her too so I don't see why I can't be a single father. I'm 33 years old and a successful businessman. I think I am within right to want to have a child. I have been waiting for a call from Wayne telling me what

Ntombi has decided on for a week when he finally told me that she is willing to do this for me. I have never been so happy in my life. It will finally happen. In a few months I will be holding my little one. She also agreed to come live with me. I got the cottage at the back ready for her. It is small but she might want her privacy. It has a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. I want her to be close so that I can be there through each milestone of the pregnancy but I would hate to make her feel suffocated that is why I will let her have her own

space. I was willing to accommodate her child too but I must say him being at his grannies will make things a bit easier. I'm sure we would have gotten along well though because I'm good with kids. We signed all the legal documents and can now finally get the ball rolling. There were moments where I felt like she was hesitant but she assured me she is fine, saying that the thought of just leaving her house and getting pregnant again was making her nervous. My mother was happy to hear that things will finally begin but my father

said that he wants nothing to do with this. That he does not believe a man can raise a child alone, implying that is a woman's job. This man need to move on with the times. I'm glad that Wayne offered to take care of things by choosing the best professionals to handle this. I would not have had time to do such. I know it sounds reckless of me but my main focus has been finding a surrogate, now that I have I don't want to deal with the stress of choosing the team of professionals. Wayne knows the best people and I'm sure the

people he has recommended are best. I just want the process to start.

I'm to meet Ntombi again today. I just want it to be us. I want her to feel comfortable around me since we will be living in the same yard. I made sure it is a public space so she'll be comfortable and feel safe. She walked into the coffee shop and held onto her bag tightly, she seemed nervous. I stood and met her at the door where she stood standing. Why does she not walk in? She looked relieved when she saw my familiar face, even managed to smile at

me. I'm not really one to smile often but I smiled back anyway. She needs to know that I can be trusted. We walked back to my table, she sat down before I could even pull a chair out for her. I guess she is one of those independent women. All the women I have been with liked being treated like a princess. I can't compare my past relationships with this though, my relationship with Ntombi is way different. I asked if she wanted anything and she shook her head and said no thanks. We first sat in awkward

silence until I decided to break the ice.

Liyema: "You must really miss your boy?", she looked at me as though she had no clue what I'm on about. "Please just be yourself, Ntombi. This is just the beginning of a long journey you and I are about to take. I want you to know that you can lean on me and you can even invite your boy to visit when you miss him", I added hoping to make her relax a bit. I know this is all new to her.

Ntombi: "Thank you...uhm I'm sure h...he would like that", she stuttered.

Liyema: "I'm also sorry for asking over and beyond by asking you to move in with me. You will have your own space. We will be living in the same yard but different houses, unless you want to live in the big house because the cottage is really small, it used to be where my help stayed but she is no longer a stay on domestic worker since she got married. Please don't be offe..."

Ntombi: "Mr Elephant, it's okay. I will live wherever you feel comfortable.", she said softly. I realized that I have been talking too much.

Liyema: "I'm sorry, this just means so much to me for a woman to want to do this for people like me is amazing. I want you to know that I appreciate it.", I said and she looked down.

Ntombi: "Why are you doing it?", she asked and I broke the brief eye contact and cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, it is non of m business.", she added and fiddled with her fingers.

Liyema: "I have wanted to be a father for so long now. I was married and a lot happened there that led to a divorce. I no longer want marriage but I still want a

child or perhaps even more in future", my words left her with eyes filled with pity. I know that she pities me.

Ntombi: "So you are comfortable with not knowing the mother of the child? What if he/she wonders and want to know who she is?", she asked while looking into my eyes, almost into my soul in a way.

Liyema: "I will deal with that once I get there. For now this is where I am and my child will always know that I wanted him regardless of how he will be conceived, I will love him."

Ntombi: "Him?"

Liyema: "Yeah I would like a boy and with this IVF it is possible", she just nodded slowly.

Ntombi: "Is your egg donor someone you know personally?", she asked with curiosity.

Liyema: "No, it is not.", she looked shocked.

Ntombi: "So are you telling me that you have never met the woman who's blood will run through your child's veins?"

Liyema: "No, I was given a list of women who donated eggs and all their details. The donor I

selected has a great profile", my words left her with an open mouth.

Ntombi: "How can you put so much faith in others. What is it is all lies in those profiles?", she asked almost sounding sad.

Liyema: "They are professionals.", I answered.

Ntombi: "But there are always human errors. What if the woman you chose did not pass the screening but they put her picture in a healthy woman's profile by mistake?", she asked.

Liyema: "Do you always over think situations?"

Ntombi: "I'm just asking. Things happen. Deception and mistakes are real things", she said softly.

Liyema: "Well don't worry about that"

we spoke more about the subject and she made me see things differently. Ironically my father said the same thing about me choosing a stranger to be the mother of my child when I really don't know anything about the donor but what was shown to me by the clinic. My father put it in a

judgmental way which made me not want to listen but Ntombi put it in an educational way. Would knowing a donor be better, but what if she decides to keep the baby? I was now filled with doubts. We sat in silence while she ate the carrot cake she ordered and I drank water. This time the silence was tolerable, well at least for me. I looked at her while she ate. The waiter came to ask if we were still fine and Ntombi flashed a beautiful smile, filled with such gentleness before nodding. It was as if I was looking at her in slow motion. She

looked at me for a second, focused her eyes back on her cake but quickly lifted her head to look at me again with a puzzled look. I was starrng too much and she noticed. I looked down and at her again.

Liyema: "Please be my egg donor and surrogate", she coughed. I offered her my water and she drank it. I nearly killed the poor girl.

Ntombi: "Mr Elephant, that was not what we have discussed and agreed upon.", she managed to say. "Plus you have fears about such. You yourself said that you do

not want to risk a surrogate getting attached to the child."

Liyema: "I know but I have changed my mind. You have gone through screening already so we can just start the process now"

Ntombi: "I don't want a child", she said softly.

Liyema: "Well it would not be your child. We stick to the old agreement but only change it to you also being the donor. I will compensate you"

Ntombi: "Why does everyone think that they can just do as they please with my body? No, I will

not do that!", she said with tear filled eyes before rushing out.

I banged the table and regretted what I had just said. It was wrong of me to just throw such at her. Heck, is it even what I want? I just suddenly don't feel comfortable with the donor chosen. Ntombi I don't know either but she is real, I have seen her with my own eyes and I would not mind my boy looking like her if that was the case. The donor looks beautiful on picture too but she is just fiction. Yes, she is human but one I have never met, I don't know the

sound of her voice. I sat there and knew that Ntombi would ask to be a surrogate for someone else and I will understand. I should learn to think before I speak. Now I have to start over again looking for a surrogate. I will call and apologize for hurting and offending her. Maybe I should the females I know if they will be willing to be donors, not that I have not already done that but people change their minds all the time. Maybe they might agree next time. I no longer want to be matched with a strange donor. I don't know what it is that I

want anymore. Maybe my father was right. This is no way to bring a child into the world. It broke my heart thinking about stopping but maybe I'm just not meant to be a father.

NTOMBI

I stormed out of that place as fast as I could. I will not do such. If I donate eggs, that child will be biologically mine. I walked pass Bonga's ugly car and did not look back when he called my name. His car was driving slowly next to me before I knew it. He demanded that I get in but I refused. He told me to not dare make him

angry because I will not like the outcomes. I looked at him feeling defeated. Perhaps I should just go stand in the street corners and sell my body. Not like I have any dignity left anyway. Bonga stripped me off all of it. I got into his car and he drove off to another location. I told him what happened and he shook his head in disbelief. I'm glad that he finds this as ridiculous as I do.

Bonga: "So you acted like a drama queen because of that? Many women donate eggs, Ntombi. There is nothing special about your case."

Ntombi: "I don't want to have a child", I shouted.

Bonga: "The child would not be yours legally!", he shouted back. "You forget that there will be no baby anyway. You will continue to take contraceptives so that no pregnancy happens. The doctor will then confirm that you are "pregnant", you will fake a pregnancy for a few months and then "LOSE" the baby but by then we would at least have made a little money from this guy and you being the egg donor means more cash.", he said with a smile.

Ntombi: "I will not do it. I don't know if contraceptives will be affective with such a process, maybe with natural conception but not this. I will also not fake a pregnancy"

Bonga: "Okay then I kill, kill, kill. You think I fear pulling the trigger? Just to show you how serious I am. I will even go visit your father and burn his house while they are inside", he said and he did not sound like he was joking.

Ntombi: "You are so evil, Bonga", I said with tears rolling down my cheeks. "I hate you", I added and

hit him in his face. He did not hit back.

Bonga: "Hate me while making money for me. You can thank your lucky stars that I still need you to be pretty or you would have paid for hitting and disrespecting me like this.

Ntombi: "How do you even get to make these people do this for you? I doubt doctors and other staff at the fertility clinic will do as you say, to them you are no body or did you threaten to kill them too? ", I said and he laughed.

Bonga: "It is amazing what a little information on someone can do. It makes them be puppets. Much like you. You fear that I might take the people you love from you forever and so you do as I want. When you have dirt on people they try to cover it up. Wayne is one of those kinds and Wayne is well connected at that clinic so he has his contacts that have nothing to do with me. All I know is that things will work out as planned. Perhaps we don't even have to make them put the embryo in you. Perhaps we can let them get the eggs because this

fool will have to see you take whatever treatment since you will be living with him. Then Wayne's people lie and said they did the plantation and then boom after that you become "pregnant", he said with a psycho smile on his face. This man is mad. "So Ntombi girl, go and give your eggs. I hope they are not rotten", he laughed. Liyema called on Bonga's phone because he thinks it is mine. Bonga told me to tell him that I will do it. I answered and said what Bonga told me to say. I'm officially a con artist. Liyema sounded so happy when he heard.,

if only he knew. I wish he could change clinics. Wayne can't have corrupt friend in all of them. I wish I had not reacted as I did when Liyema told me he does not know the woman who's blood will flow in his child's veins. I would not have been in this situation right now. I'm not even going to pray for guidance because that will be an insult to the most High. I told Bonga to tell his to not really put the embryo in my womb. That I will donate eggs, but they not do anything about it. I will insist on going in alone when it is the day to plant the embryo so

that I can get away with not doing it. I will lie to Mr Elephant and say I had it done and the doctor will confirm it. After a while the doctor will lie and say I am pregnant and will only fake until three months and fake a miscarriage. That way Liyema will cut his loses and choose other options. I hate that I have to play with serious things such as miscarriages because some woman have them for real and they hurt. I hate that I have to lie to Mr Elephant. I hate that I will have to take medication and injections a lot. I hate this entire

deception. I do not know what Bonga has on Wayne but it must be big for Wayne to bend over backwards like this for him.

Clearly he must be playing this fraudulent and corrupt staff from the clinic himself because Bonga does not have money. If only Wayne knew that he will forever be at Bonga's mercy. I do not want my loved ones to die. I might hate Nomvula but I would never wish that she would burn. I might not really be in my father and his family's lives nor in Mrs B's and Zim's but I will not let them die because of me. I

thought of killing myself but truth is I do not want to die. I don't have anything to live for, but I do not want to die, not by suicide. I can not believe that my toxic relationship with Bonga has dragged yet another innocent person into our mess. Liyema might be an intense person who rarely smiles but he is not a bad person. All he wants is a child and he has his reasons for doing it like this. His marriage must have been awful because his tone changed when he told me about the fact that he was once married. Now I'm willing to fake

a pregnancy and give him false hope only to crush him with a loss of a child that would not have existed in the first place. I belong in the deepest corner of hell with Bonga for this. I'm doing this to keep my family safe but it is still not a good enough reason. I hate Bonga but I now hate myself even more.

SEVENTEEN
NTOMBI

Liyema and I have made a new agreement. One that states

that I will be the egg donor. A part of me is glad that this is just a scam. I can not imagine that I would have been willing to give my child up had I been able to give birth to one. I still have not told Liyema that I have seen him before at church. He might go and let Mrs B know about our agreement and then she will want to come to my rescue and in turn put her own life at risk. She is too precious to me to risk putting her life in danger again. I wish this man was not so desperate to have a child. I wish that he could try to give love another chance,

get married again and then have babies. Something tells me that love has hurt him so much that he gave up on ever trying again. I do not blame him. Should I ever find a way to get away from Bonga without putting my life and my loved ones life at risk I will take it and I will never get into another relationship. I could get Bonga arrested but I do not trust our justice system. He will be out in a few days, filled with rage and do the worst, not even a protection order will help. I will put some of the money that I will make from this aside. Once I

get a chance I will go somewhere far where Bonga can't find me. He will realize that I did not go to Mrs B's and leave them alone. Hopefully he will let go of me. If I did not know any better I would say he was obsessed with me or at least with my presence. Liyema has played right into Bonga and his fraudster friends trap. He even offered to pay me way more than he should for donating my eggs. His willingness to bend the rules of the law to get this done is music to Bonga's ears. I have moved to Liyema's place a few days ago and his

house is very beautiful. The little cottage that was used by his domestic worker is decent as well. He was concerned about the size saying it is too small. For me it was perfect. It was clean, cozy and far from Bonga. The guilt has been eating at me since the day that I met him, it has become worse now that I am living in his house.

Something is wrong with the plumbing in the cottage and that meant I had to use the bathroom in the main house. I won't have to do that after today because the plumbing guys

are busy fixing the pipes. I sat outside on the patio just taking in the warmth of the sun. Liyema walked out and sat on the wooden seat next to me. I sat up but he indicated with his hand that I should not get up.

Liyema: "Look Ntombi, I know I sound like a broken record by now because I keep thanking you non stop for doing this but I just feel like I could never do enough to show my gratitude to you".

Ntombi: "You compensating me way over what the law agrees upon is thanks enough Mr Ele...I

mean Liyema", I said trying not to sound as annoyed as I feel.

Liyema: "So is that why you have been looking like someone stole your favorite toy", he said and laughed. "I'm sorry, I'm just worried that might be the reason why you aren't fine. If me giving you too much money than agreed upon is offensive to you, I'm sorry. This is not my way of buying your body but my way of saying thank you. You can spend the money that I should by law give you for lose of income on yourself and the extra bit you can save for your son. I'm sure being

a single parent is not easy and especially if you are not..."

Ntombi: "Yet here you are on your way to being a single parent on purpose", I said sarcastically cutting his sentence short. He exhaled loudly and looked at the big plant in front of us. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm like this maybe it is best I stay out of your way and only meet when we need to go to the doctor for my check ups", I added and he looked at me again.

Liyema: "It's the ovarian stimulation treatment that you are taking. The doctor did say

that is will have side effects. Speaking about that, are you ready for today's shot?", he asked with concern.

Ntombi: "Yeah", I answered in a sad whisper.

I'm trying not to show any weakness in front of him but I keep failing. I am the person who "passed" all her psychological test so I should be able to handle everything or at east pretend since I did not go to any test. He brushed my right shoulder gently in comfort before standing to get the injection. I have to inject myself daily to stimulate my

ovaries. I can not inject myself. I tried to and I ended up crying before the tip of the needle even touched my skin. Liyema has been very supportive. I thought that he would call Wayne and tell him he wanted another person to be his egg donor and surrogate, a stronger woman and not a weakling like me but he did not. Instead he had offered to be the one injecting me. The doctor showed us how so he know. He put on his rubber gloves, prepared the injection and asked if I am ready. I nodded and covered my eyes with my hands. I felt a

small prick in my skin and he was done before I knew it. I don't know why I still fear needles because they are not so painful. He smiled, told me how proud he is of me and took out candy from his pocket and gave it to me. We both laughed at the joke. He does not laugh nor smile often but when he does, he becomes more handsome, more approachable. My eating habits have also changed and we are both on this clean eating meal planning. It actually tastes good. He says he wants me to be as healthy as possible so that the pregnancy will be easy on me and

good for the baby. I can not help but wonder what kind of woman would leave such a kind man or is he also a wolf in sheep clothing? It's Saturday and I thought he would go out like he did last time but he did not. The doorbell rang and I did not know if I should ignore it or go see who it is. I called out for Liyema from downstairs but he did not respond. I slowly and nervously walked to the door, took a deep breath and opened the door. A man and woman stood in front of me and it seemed the woman was having a few serious words with

the man before stopping to look at me. The man did not look happy at all. They both looked well put together if that is even a way to describe elders. They were not old but certainly not young either. Perhaps in their 50's or 60's? The woman had a slim petite body and had the most beautiful clear skin and wore a weave that looked like real hair. The man was tall and dark and had a serious expression, almost like that of Liyema. I greeted and Liyema came to the door to rescue me just in time. He did not seem all too happy to have his

two guests at his house. He let them in and I excused myself but he stopped me. He introduced them as his parents and told them who I am. Mrs Elephant smiled and extended her arm, I put my hand in hers and shook her hand. Her hand is so soft, like a person who has never held a broom in her life. Mr Elephant looked like a man who had better things to do than come to his son's house to meet his surrogate. Well I'm not surprised because Liyema mentioned that his father did not approve.

Mr Elephant: "Where is your home?", he asked looking at me.

Ntombi: "I live here in Ca[e To..."

Mr Elephant: "I'm not asking about the home you adopted for yourself. I'm talking about where your where you were born", he said in stern voice. I left like a child being scolded.

Liyema: "You will not come from your house to mine to disrespect my guest, Tata", he said with a hint of anger in his voice.

Mr Elephant: "This is all unnatural, Liyema. Stop behaving like a child. Your first marriage did

not work out but that does not mean you have to give up on finding a woman to marry and have children with. Not this nonsense of having a child conceived like they are some science project. My girl, do you believe in all of this?", he asked. I looked at Liyema and his eyes were filled with anger and a sadness I'm sure he is trying his hardest to hide.

Ntombi: "I would not have been here had I not, Mr Elephant.", I said still looking at Liyema and he nodded. I think he was grateful that someone was in his corner.

Mrs Elephant: "Tata, this is not what we agreed upon in the car. Please a fight is not what I want", she said in the softest voice I have ever heard coming from an adult woman.

Liyema: "Maybe next time say when you are coming. What if I had taken Ntombi to a doctor's appointment?"

Mr Elephant: "I expected the girl to be white, not black. When did our children lose sight of who they are? Why don't you two just get married and have this baby? Now you want to rent the poor girl's womb and expect her to give her

child away and never look back?

This is not for us, stop adopting western ways of doing things.

Get married and raise this child together, you will learn to love each other. Not this nonsense of having a child and going your separate ways, this is..."

Mrs Elephant: "Tata", she pleaded with her husband.

Liyema: "Please leave", he said looking at his parents. I stood there not knowing if I should give them space or stay.

Mr Elephant: "With pleasure. Let's go Nomsebenzi."

Mrs Elephant: "I came here to see my child. I'm not ready to go"

Mr Elephant: "Then get a taxi home. If I stay here any longer, I might die because of the things your children do to me. The other is living a life of alcohol and cheap girls, dragging our name through the mud and wasting money and the other makes babies by help of a machine as if we Elephant men are not capable of making babies naturally. Your great grandfathers must be turning in their graves. Your father must be utterly disappointed in you for renting your body to a man you

barely know when you could just make him proud by finding a man who will pay lobola and marry you, my girl. The things you children do to us, is just abuse. We do not deserve this.

Liyema: "Maybe, just maybe if you stop making everything about you like you always do then you would see the beauty in this and be excited that you becoming the grandfather you have always wanted to be", he said. His father just raised his hand and walked out of the house.

Mrs Elephant: "He will come around, ndoda.", she said and I

still can't get used to her soft voice.

Liyema: "I don't know why you and your rude husband insist of harassing me when I'm not asking a single thing from you two"

Mrs Elephant: "This is new to him, Liyema. He does not know how to explain it to the family and it gets to him"

Ntombi: "Please excuse me. Mrs Elephant it was a pleasure to meet you.", I said with a smile.

Mrs Elephant: "Don't rush off, Ntombi. I'm here to meet you. I

want to see the woman who will carry my grandchild. You look so beautiful. She will pass on good genes to your children, Ndoda", she said with a smile.

Liyema: "Don't talk as if we will be a traditional family where we will debate about whether the child look like me or Ntombi.

Ntombi will not be its mother.", his words left me with a sadness I can not explain. "I hope you and your husband have not come here to try and pressure into another forced marriage. I will not marry, Ntombi. She is my surrogate and that is where it will end"

Mrs Elephant: "I'm here to show you that I'm here for whatever you may need, Ndoda. Not to force you to change your mind or get married. I want to be in this baby's life from day one as the proud grandma. He will have your blood and no matter how he got conceived I will give him the love that any granny would her grandchild, especially since it will be the first", she said with a smile.

Liyema: I'm going to make something to eat. Ntombi, should you at any moment feel uncomfortable, just stand and

excuse yourself. You need not get involved in my family issues. My parents can be a handful, I'm sure you have noticed already. You don't even have to sit with my mother alone.", he said and I saw the look of sadness in his mother's eyes.

Ntombi: "I don't mind.", I said with a smile. I really did not mind. Mrs Elephant smiled at me.

Liyema gave his mother one last look before heading to his kitchen. Mrs Elephant invited me to sit next to her in the lounge it was a bit strange but she had a few great conversation starters. She

asked where I was from and what my occupation was. I told her all the lies Bonga told me to feed Liyema. That I was a social worker with one child. She was curious about the entire process of egg donation and surrogacy. She had clearly read up on it but she wanted to hear it from my perspective and what my experience has been so far. I told her everything. She said she will get me "goodies" to ease my pregnancy once I have fallen pregnant. She was not faking her excitement about having a grand baby. It seems she had been

asking her sons for one for a few years now, especially Liyema since he was married. Liyema came with food and the three of us ate. Mrs E was far ahead of us and already thinking about baby shower ideas. Liyema stopped her before she could even make recommendations reminding her that this is no traditional pregnancy, she apologized and asked him to be patient while she learns more about the rules of surrogacy. I think Liyema is going to keep reminding us that this is his child and not ours just so I don't get it confused. He need not

worry because there will be no baby to even fight custody over. He gets annoyed by his parents presence. I understand why his father would have that effect on him but why his mother? There is more to the story than I know. I can't help but wonder if his first marriage was an arranged one because he mentioned something about being forced to marry. There is a lot of bad vibes between them and he does not talk about his brother either. It seems Mr Elephant sees both his sons as good for nothings. Liyema is not a good for nothing. The

man has his own business, he goes to church and seems to try his best to live a life of righteousness, he has his own place and looks after himself. I don't see him qualifying as a disappointment as a son but then again I don't know the entire story. All I know is what I have observed from his behavior so far and what he has allowed me to know about him, which is not much. A part of me wants to get to know him but not because I'm interested in him but to know what his story is and why has he come to the decision of using a

surrogate. Why him and his ex never had kids if they were married for wife years before the divorce? The day went on and Mrs E left promising to come every now and then. Liyema and I watched a comedy show. His laugh is contagious and I found myself laughing until tears came out of my eyes. I wonder why he does not laugh often?

Ntombi: "Your mother seem nice.", I said unexpectedly. He turned his head to look at me.

Liyema: "She's alright", he said.

Ntombi: "So you have a brother? Any more siblings?"

Liyema: "Uhm...yeah he is the only one", he said sounding unsure of his answer.

Liyema: "How does he feel about you having a baby?"

Liyema: "Zuko is not one to take life too seriously. If something feels right to a person he will encourage that person to go ahead. He is excited about being an uncle", he said with a smile.

Liyema: "Are you two close?"

Liyema: "We are brothers. We fight and we make up and repeat.

I love him and I will do everything to protect him. I just wish he loved himself enough to protect himself," he said softly.

Ntombi: "The drinking your father mentioned?", he looked at me.

Liyema: "Yeah and just not having direction in life. I can't tell you how many varsities that guy has been to. The fact that Mma keeps giving him pity money is not helping. She will go on about how she is washing her hands off him and then he would talk about how much he wants to go back to school. Education is impotent to

Mma so he knows which soft spots to hit", he said and laughed.

Liyema: "Sounds like a real handful", we both laughed.

Liyema: "He is and I pray my child does not take any of his traits.

The baby may look like him because he got Mma's looks. You ladies are into yellow bone men right?", he asked and looked at me.

Ntombi: "I've never thought about skin tones when it comes to love but I will tell you that dark skinned men do things to me", we both laughed.

Liyema: "So had we been in a different situation, would I have done things to you since I'm as dark as they get?", his question made me blush. I did not know what to say. "Relax Ntombi, it was just a joke. You almost turned a shade of pink there from the blushing", he joked and we both laughed.

Ntombi: "I don't blush, I'm black like you remember?", I said and threw one of the small cushions at him and he caught it.

Liyema: 'You wish you had all this melanin, lady. You have some but

it is not this chocolaty", he said brushing his face and I laughed.

Ntombi: "Whatever", I showed him the middle finger and he laughed so much.

Liyema: "You made me laugh more than this comedy show. You have a way of making me want to tell you things. No wonder you are a social worker. So since you know somewhat about my family tell me about yours. Where is your boy's dad?", I was not prepared for his question because Bonga did not say what I should say.

Ntombi: "I don't know. He used to abuse me and I took my stuff and left while pregnant"

Liyema: "I'm glad that you knew that you were worth more than an abusive bastard. I'm sure someday your boy will thank you for walking away. The last thing a boy needs to grow up seeing is his father hitting his mother because he will grow up thinking it is what being a man is about. He would most likely have ended up beating his own women someday. I might not always agree with how my father is but he treats my mom like a queen, in

his own intense traditional man type of way but non the less, he always told us a woman is to be respected and if he finds we hit women he will show us what he is made of. Boys needs that good fatherly role model. I hope that there is someone at your mom's house who get to fill that role?"

Ntombi: "My father is amazing. My boy has a great man to look up to", I lied and he smiled and nodded.

He asked me more about my family. Most of the things were true stuff that I combined with a lot of lying as to not let him

know me too much. It is the first time that we have had such a conversation. Our conversations are centered around my doctors appointment, him injecting me, me reminding him not to forget an appointment but never really about our families. I like his mom and she seems to like me too. I've just realized that I will not just be breaking Liyema's heart with my con skills but also his mother's. I asked him how much he trust the professionals who are handling his case again and he once again said he trust Wayne's recommendations because his

personal reviews are great. I don't doubt that Wayne has a good track record and maybe he is not a bad person. Perhaps he, just like me is just a pawn in Bonga's game. Bonga got me a phone and only he calls me on it and Liyema too should he have too. He called to remind me not to mess things up and for the millionth time reminded me of what the consequences of me messing up would be. I wish I could just get rid of this man but not by killing him. I will definitely have to take some of the money and keep it. I'm not proud of how I will get

the money but it might be my only way to freedom. I will go somewhere far from the Western Cape. Surely Bonga won't have friends in another province but he does in the Eastern Cape so I can't go there either. I might go to Gauteng. I've heard that jobs are easy to come by there. I will soon be living an abuse free life and I can not wait.

EIGHTEEN

Mrs B

weeks have gone and I still could not find Ntombi. A part of me fears that she might be buried in a shallow grave. I'm trying to keep positive but I know what abusers are capable of. Some would kill their partner, hide the body and go for a beer as if nothing happened. I have been praying hard for God to show me that she is still alive. My private investigator has also been unsuccessful and he is the best there is. Bonga must be really good at hiding because he is sought after by an entire community. Mr Koni said that a

few days ago the community took matters into their own hands by killing a young man who wanted to hurt a small child. What has happened to our beautiful land? Do we no longer feel empathy? Has the spirit of ubuntu died? The devil is playing with these kids and I feel helpless. I met Mr Koi's daughter Sindi, she cried when I told her that I do not know where Ntombi is. Like me she fears for the worst with each day that passes. I pray that my girl be safe where she is. I have decided to go to the Eastern Cape to see my mother

and I will also go to see Ntombi's grandparents. I want them to know that there is a part of Nobandla out there. I took a few days to rest. I referred my clients to a friend of mine but most chose to wait until I return. I was busy packing when I heard the door shut loudly. I remember locking it so I rushed to see what was going on. I found Zim leaning over the kitchen counter looking troubled.

Mrs B: "Want to talk about it?",
I said walking closer to her.

Zim: "Why should I bother when all you have been doing is wasting

your energy on finding someone who does not want to be found?", she turned to look at me.

Mrs B: "I'm not having this argument with you again. You shut me out whenever I reach out and yet you say that I am more focused on Ntombi? Why did you then pity and help her when she was in hospital, Zimkhitha? Because had it not been for you I would not have known about her. What has gotten into you? You refuse my help but you also throw tantrums when I try to help Ntombi. You are behaving like a spoiled brat and I will not

entertain it.", I said and she looked down.

Zim: "I don't know what is happening to me, Mama. I'm just so short tempered. I lash out on patients, my therapist and Zweli. I'm a mess and I don't know how to fix it.", she said while brushing her face with her hands.

Mrs B: "I'll postpone my trip and stay with you"

Zim: "No, it would be the second time you do that. I know you miss Makhulu and you want to talk to Ntombi's mom's family. Go, Mama. The chances of me talking are not

much anyway because I myself don't understand what is going on. When I do, you will be the first to know. I want you to help Ntombi but I guess sharing you with someone else is all new to me, I'm used to having your undivided attention and it is selfish of me."

Mrs B: "Have you an Zweli made progress?"

Zim: "How when he feels like I don't respect him? I have been having this fear of him turning into the monster that Tata was but it seems I'm the one who is heading that way. What if I'm

like him, Mama? It's not only men who abuse, women do too."

Mrs B: "You are not like him. You are most probably just overworked and stressed about the situation with Zweli.", I hugged her and she started to cry. Zim is no one to cry often.

"Oh, my baby this too will pass. You are not like your father. Let me call home to say I will come next week.", I added because I can't leave her this way.

Zim: "No, no go, go. I will be fine. No more tears. See?", she said while wiping her tears with the

sleeve of her shirt quickly. My heart was worn.

She could see that my heart was no longer on the trip so she did her best to convince me that she is fine. I don't like the fact that she thinks she's an abuser like her father was. Zim does not know the hell her father put me through and though we all have an evil side to us, I doubt that my girl will ever hurt someone in such a manner. She is just letting fear holding her back from happiness. The irony is she was preaching to Ntombi about how Ntombi must not allow her fears

to control her, yet she is doing just that. She is a strong girl but sometimes too strong for her own good. A trait she takes from my mother. The woman is like iron woman. All my life I have never once seen my mother show weakness. It helped in shaping us to be strong women too but I feel like it was not all that good. Perhaps I'm also not good at being vulnerable because I was raised by a woman who never did and Zim got it from me. Three generations of female warriors but at some point one generation will have to allow themselves to

be weak at times and allow another person to be their strength and I hope that Zim will be the one to break that chain. I do not want my future grandchildren to think that it is wrong to cry whether they will be boys or girls. I will wait until Zim lets me in. I was tempted to call Zweli and plead that he be patient with her but I decided against it if I do that I will find myself involving myself in their marriage too. They will get married because I have seen how that boy treats her. With her father, the first thing he did was

keep me to himself. There have been moments where Zim would say Zweli almost had to force her to come visit me and go out with friends. He wants her to have a life outside of him and is not isolating her from loved ones. He treats her like a queen and the look her has in his eyes when he looks at her is priceless. So I know he won't just give up on her, he is just tired and has thrown the ball into Zim's court. She has to decide what to do from here because he has made it clear what he wants from her and that is to love her, marry her,

grow with her and build a home with her. She has to decide if she also wants the same. Her returning to therapy is a sign that she does but deep inside she has to decide to let go of the fear. We spoke for a little while and she told me to send regards to the family. We do visit my family but she is much closer to her father's family than mine and I have no problem with that. There was a time when they tried to poison her against me by saying I was not trying to protect myself when I shot her father but rather intended on

murdering him. It put strain on our relationship but the devil did not win. God mended the broken bond between us. I won't say I am their favorite person but we all tolerate one another. There is a lot of pretending from their side but that is none of my business as I go to them with a pure heart. Some hate me and I understand why. I took their son, uncle, brother and friend from them but had I not my family would have lost a daughter, aunt, sister and friend that day. He was going to kill me. People think it is easy to forget such but all I wanted was

peace. I did not kill some thug who broke into my house. I killed the love of my life, a man I promised forever to. No one truly heals from that but I soldier on for my child and those who need me. I have moments where I just scream out of anger but I end up on my knees and pray. Had it not been for God, I do not know where I would be. I would most probably have been a drunk, a mad woman or even dead but here I am helping those who have no one to talk to and give them hope. I have managed to spread the gospel and had a few clients

get closer to God. He is the real therapist, no wound is too big for Him. I am but a resource but He is the source. Get closer to the source and you will find healing. I said goodbye to her and promised to give her gran a big kiss from her.

I left for the airport before I miss my flight. I hope that Ntombi's grandparents are still well and strong. It is sad that I take the bad news about their daughter having died long ago because no parent wants to believe that their child could have died before them and that when

you have not seen them since they were young. That is why it is so important for Ntombi to meet them. She has to take them to their daughter's final resting place. To know where a loved one is whether dead or alive is important to Africans, just knowing where their child's remains are might bring them the closure they desperately might be in need of. I don't have a speech prepared about what I will say but I think I will know once I am with them. I have prayed about this and believe

that equip with the needed strength and words for it.

LIYEWA

Ntombi has been on treatment for a few weeks now and today is the day for the egg retrieval. I must say that I have grown to be fond of her. She makes my house seem less big. She still sleeps in the cottage outside but I find myself being there after work. There were days when I had to stop myself from going because I feel like it might be too much for her. I don't know what I'm more drawn to, her company, her food or how homey the

cottage suddenly feels. I think I am drawn to all of those and she does not seem to mind. I hated injecting her with the treatment she was given but it made me feel like I am a part of the future pregnancy more. This woman is doing so much for me. She has been eating food that she won't usually eat and has even found some more delicious clean eating meals. I do not understand how some men let go of such a woman. This is the type of woman that can turn a man's house into a home. How her child's father could raise his hand at her

is beyond me. It is such men who do not deserve to be called men. I would love to meet her son but I feel like she wants to keep this as professional as possible and she is right. The last I want is the boy to get attached. The treatment did not go without it's side effects but she championed through. She has been asking a bit more about my ex wife and it is never a thing I want to talk about. If I get too personal it will make the lines between our professional and personal relationship blurry. I think both of us have been alone for awhile

and now that there is a person who seem to "get" the other we can't help but have conversations instead of small talks. My mom loves Ntombi and keep on saying she wishes the baby would look like her mother. I cringe each time she says the word mother because it is not the correct word to use in this situation. There is a father and a surrogate. Ntombi has asked me not to get angry when my mother talks like that because they are old and don't full understand everything just as yet as long as she and I know what is what. So now I let my mother

talk and boy can she talk. She insists on the baby shower and we agreed that it be done once the baby is born. She invited Ntombi and we once again had to educate her in that once the baby is born Ntombi and I go our separate ways. I assume she fears that Ntombi won't be able to let go and I will admit that I have those fears too but Ntombi seems relaxed and keeps things professional so I trust she won't go against our agreement. I have been going to church but I have not disclosed that I have started with the surrogacy. I don't want

negative and church people can sometimes have plenty of that. Only my friend Vusi Gumbi who is also co founder of the media company I am CEO at knows.

I was in the office about to head out to pick Ntombi up from her appointment. I hope the egg retrieval has not put too much strain on her. I know all the doctor's appointments have been exhausting. I put my jacket on when Vusi walked in with papers I needed to sign before going.

Vusi: "The man is in such a hurry that he does not even have time

to put ink on paper", he joked and we both laughed.

Liyema: "I don't know how today will be for Ntombi, bra. They said it will not be painful to retrieve the eggs but we men will never really know what woman go through", I said and stood just looking at me.

Vusi: "Had I not known better I'd have thought you are going to get your dear wife."

Liyema: "Well good thing you know better. Give me those so I can sign and go", he handed me the papers and I signed.

Vusi: "When will I meet this lady who will make it possible for me to be an uncle?"

Liyema: "Never. You have no business knowing her. She's not at my house to meet my family and buddies and come to events with me. It is enough that she got exposed to my father's rudeness and my mother's never ending chetter. It might be too much and she might change her mind"

Vusi: "I hear you, man. I'm actually excited. My boy will have a junior soon. I know you have been wanting a child since...since...uhm."

Liyema: "Since I got married. There is a reason why it was never meant to happen there and I am grateful. I can't imagine having an eternal bond with that woman". I said hoping it will be the end of this conversation. He nodded and we said goodbye. He is the only person who knows the entire story. He knows the real reason why my marriage ended things I have not even told my family. My ex wife is Zingisa Elephant. I say Elephant because even after the divorce she refuses to change to her maiden surname. Something I suspect my

father encouraged because he has told me many times that according to culture she is still my wife. If only they knew the reasons why I broke it off with her, the real reasons. Zingi was a girl whose family and mine were close. So close that our families made us believe that we were soul mates. Just soon after varsity the pressure to get married started. I was just not ready but I felt like it was the next best thing to do. We gave into the pressure and I think we both knew that we did not love each other beyond the love of

childhood friends. Our marriage was awkward at first but we let the friendship we had lead us and it became better. It was easier to be a married couple who did what is expected of married couples until things just changed. I can not get over how much things change and how I ended up being the one who had to pay at the end. Thinking about it made me angry. I snapped out of my bitter thoughts and thought about how today was a good day, a day closer to being a father. I drove to the clinic and found Ntombi sitting and waiting for me

already. I greeted her again even if I saw her about an hour ago.

Liyema: "How are you feeling?"

Ntombi: "Just mild cramps and some spotting. I" be fine though. They said I should at least rest for 24 hours"

Liyema: "You can hang your feet up high and I will be your servant." I said and we both laughed. "Was it painful? I know they said it won't be but hey", I lifted my hands up.

Ntombi: "There was some discomfort but not pain. I was given more medication, something

about helping the lining of my womb."

Liyema: "Okay, do you need anything?"

Ntombi: "I just want to go home. I mean to your house", she said and looked down.

Liyema: "Thank you, Ntombi. Thank you MamTshawe. Like I said no amount of money will show my gratitude enough. To think that in six or so days they will be planting the embryo in your womb and the next stage of our journey begins", said and she started to cry.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry. I think this treatment still makes me have mood swings. I don't know why I am crying", she said while covering her face with her top. I sat closer to her and wrapped my arm around her. I don't do affection much but with her I have to try because she is doing this for me.

Liyema: "Can you imagine how worse it will be when you are pregnant, so I had better practice my consoling skills now because I suck at it. I feel awkward just giving people hugs, like now", she laughed softly, her head still hidden in her top.

Ntombi: "Is that why you are sitting like robbo-cop next to me", she showed her smiley tear filled face and we both laughed.

Lliyema: "Oh come on, I'm trying here."

Ntombi: "Yes, you are. If many men were like this, children would not know what broken homes are.", she said it with such sadness.

Lliyema: "Are we talking about the father of your child? Look, your boy might not have grown up in a traditional home with a mother and father under the

same roof like you and I did but you are giving him love and that should count for a lot. Even my child will not grow up in a traditionally structured home but he will never lack, therefore will not feel like he is from a broken home. I still believe it takes a village to raise a child. Your boy has his village and mine will too because my mother and brother will be there.", I said and she looked at me and nodded.

Ntombi: "Yeah", she said softly. I apologized to her for not being with her during this procedure and promised to be there when

the implant is being made in a few days. She said there is no need but I insisted. I will make sure that my seduce is clear on that day and my attention is with her and the process fully. To think that my sperm and her egg is being combined to form an embryo that will soon be a human being with a heart beat. Ntombi has been laying off any form of junk food because she knew how important her being healthy is to me but today I asked her if she would like to indulge on some sweet stuff since I promised to take care of her. She named a lot

of sweet treats and got them all. I also gave her the money for the egg donation. I have given her money and I thought she would go shopping but she does not. Is shopping not the first thing women think of when they have money? Strangely enough she asked that I put some into her account and give some cash. The fact that I'm bending some laws by giving her money does not sit well with me but she is a single mother to a boy child so she needs it. I had to go back to work so I left her in my domestic workers care. They get along well.

Eunice is my help's name. Kind and stubborn woman that I love as my second mother.

Eunice: "Last night I had a dream but I will not tell you.", she said while pretending to be wiping the table. She knows I will want to know what it was.

Liyema: "You want to tell me, Mamzo so do tell."

Eunice: "There was a big. Big house. Your house is a matchbox compared to it", she said and I laughed.

Liyema: "This is not a mansion. I only have three bedrooms here so

sorry if it does not compare to the house you dream about", she hated it when I interrupted her so she just stood and looked at me and I knew I had to shut it.

Eunice: "In this house was a lot of babies. Everywhere you look there where babies just everywhere. You turn left there were babies, turn right, babies. It was strange, my boy"

Liyema: "I'm sure your dream to opening a daycare is closer to being reality than you realize. That dream was showing you that",

Eunice: "There is more, Liyema let me finish"

Liyema: "And I will listen to it all later. I have a presentation in an hour and Vusi would kill me if I don't arrive on time.. Please look after Ntombi for me. If she wants to help you clean again give her that 'DON'T YOU DARE'" look you always give me, it always does the trick. I will see you ladies later and Mma said she is coming later. If she comes early please don't allow her to wake Ntombi up. You know how she gets. I'm off now. I love you Ma Eu-Eu ", I said and sped of to the door.

Eunice: "Liyema! There is more to the dream than A creche.

Liyema: "Later!", I shouted and went out of the door.

Ma Eu-Eu is someone who believes in superstition a lot so I'm sure she has some bizarre reason for this dream. She has always wanted to have a daycare for babies and toddlers and she will be great. I will even enroll my boy there if she decides to finally follow her dream. I'm sure he will be the favorite child at school but I trust her to look after him and other babies too. She does not want me to help her financially. I

think I should draw up an investor's proposal instead since she does not want hand outs, we can be business partners. I wonder why I have not thought of that earlier.? I sped off to the office to go hook a new company to make business with us. Vusi is stronger in presenting than me but I have mean negotiation skills. We could send one of our employees but this is a big client so he will appreciate the bosses giving him personal attention rather than sending a staff member. Our business is new and we are not filthy rich yet

but we are both happy with the progress. We will afford those holiday beach houses someday. I thought of Ma Eunice calling my house a matchbox and laughed again. I love the woman so much. I'm sure Ntombi will hear about that dream and I will it from Ntombi because Ma Eu leaves before I come home.

NINETEEN

MRS B

I have been back in the Eastern Cape for a week now and I still

have not gone to see Bandla's family. My sister moved to East London so my mother is also here. I told them everything about Ntombi and my mother could not believe that Nobandla had died. It affected her so much that we had to take her to a doctor. That is the reason why I have not gone and see Bandla family because if my mother could be so affected by her loss I can not imagine how her own parents will react. The last thing that I want is to kill them. My mother said I must do what is right and that is letting Bandla's parents

know that their child is no more. She says that had the tables been turned she would have wanted to know that I'm resting instead of holding onto false hope of me one day walking through the gate and she is right. I drove to Peddie in my sister's car. I have not been behind the wheel since the hijacking. I feared that I would have another panic attack but God did not allow it. I arrived safely. The speed of the car became slower as I was getting closer to my destination. I was feeling all kinds of emotions. I finally arrived and

parked my car in front of the lime green house that had two rondavels of the same colour. Their house has not changed much. It is just bigger and has an extra rondavel. Ma Mlandu came out of the house wearing a pink apron over her clothes. She had "unotyeli" all over her face which gave her face a mustard colour. That used to be our sun protection when we grew up. It is a mustard colour powder and we would mix it with water to form a paste to put over our faces. The gap between the house and the gate was quite large because of

the huge size of the yard but she walked to the gate as fast as she could. Nobandla and Ntombi are both Ma Mlandu's photocopy. I stepped out of the car so she could see that I am not some stalker. She did not recognize me at first but when she finally did her face lit up. She opened the gate and I was in her arms before I knew it. "Tata ka Nobandla", she kept on shouting, calling her husband from wherever he is hiding. The old man made his way from the back of the house. The years have caught up on him. The once

smooth skin is now covered with wrinkles. He still has the slim body frame he had years ago.

Mr Mlandu: "What is it? I almost cut myself with a knife when you called out because I thought you were being attacked.", he said looking so serious.

Mrs Mlandu: "Look who has come to visit us", she said while looking at me with a smile. The old man looked at me but I could see that he did not recognize me. "It's Nokumkani and Solomzi's daughter, sh..."

Mr Mlandu: "My Bandle's friend. You have grown so much, my child. Even your mother is no where to be seen lately after she moved. Where are you all hiding yourselves?", he shook my hand.

Mrs B: "Hello, Tata we are all still well. Mama had to live with one of my sisters because we have all moved away, uTata passed on and she became too weak to look after herself. She told me to send my greetings. She is not well but promised to come with me the next time that I visit."

Mrs Mlandu: "Let us go in, you know how these nosy people get

when they see a fancy car around here. I want to hear all about your life, my baby. I have baked fresh scones and made jam myself so you came at the right time.", she said and we walked into the house.

Mrs B: "I never told uMama this but your scones where always my favourite compared to hers.", we both laughed.

Mr Mlandu: "It seems you two will be discussing woman related stuff and I will not be a part of that. My child, it is good to see you. You have grown into a beautiful young woman. I don't

want to interrupt so let me go back to mending the fence at the back"

Mrs B: "Tata. I would actually appreciate it if you stay. It is good to see you both too but there is a reason why I came. I have so much to tell you..."

Mrs Mlandu: "Nobandla?", she said softly and the cheer in her voice faded. I nodded and Mr Mlandu pulled a chair out for me to sit on. This man was a gentleman before being a gentleman was a trend. He has always been the opposite of my father but they made their

friendship work. I remember when Nobandla and I used to play pretend and we would have a "tea party", he made time to sit and let us serve him imaginary tea. My father would say he does not have time for child's play. We used to pay shop too and would pick up empty containers from the street and those used to be our stock. Nobandla's father used to actually give us money for our "good" even if it was just empty trash. My father would say it is a waste of money. So that is why I always told Ntombi that her grandparents would never turn

her away. I know them both to be kind. Mrs Mlandu is strict but kind. Mrs Mlandu made tea and scones for the three of us and put some of her home-made jam on some. The mood in the house suddenly changed when they knew that I had news about their daughter. I know that a part of them hopes that I will say she is alive and wants to return home. Usually in such situations people would be anxious to know right away what I had to say but these two were calm. Perhaps they thought about all the years they had been waiting so what

would a few minutes of more waiting do. Once we were all seated they both looked at me. I first took a sip of the tea to wet my dry throat. My mother advised me to not try and soft soap things by beating around the bush, that I must be direct and say what I want so that is what I did. I told the entire story.

There was complete silence from both of them. They were holding hands over the table and just looked at each other. Ma Mlandu then broke down which was what I expected to happen. I could see the sadness in her husband's eyes

but he held it together. We both tried our best to comfort Ma Mlandu. I felt a sharp pain in my heart. While those who were there when Bandla died have healed from the loss and moved on, it was still raw to her parents and myself. If someone walked in here they would think Nobandla died just now the way the sadness lingered in the house. My tears flew down my cheeks and I was not about to pretend that I am fine. Mr Mlandu made a call and within a few minutes Nobandla's brother, Bandile walked in. he was told what

happened to his sister and he just fell into the chair behind him in disbelief. He started to cry but wiped his tears quickly. I wish men knew that it is okay to cry, that they won't lose their manly status within the community. I feared that Ma Mlandu would pass out like my mother almost did but she did not. After they processed the news somewhat we sat around the table again and no one was in the mood for the cold tea in front of us.

Bandile: "So that dog took my sister away from home and does not have the nerve to to come

and tell us that she has dies?
What kind of man buries a woman without her family because he was not even a son in law in this house. Nobandla was suppose to be buried by her family. That man had no right because he did not honour this family with lobola for my sister. To say I'm angry right now is an understatement..", he said with anger.

Mr Mlandu: "My child is no more and I was not even able to say goodbye or lay her to rest.

Mziwakhe did a cowardly thing. Nobandla can't be buried in his family's grave site when there

was no relation built between us and his family."

Ma Mlandu: "Let us go and get our child's remains and bury her here where she belongs. I'm sure she is not resting in peace."

Mrs B: "It seems they were married legally, Mama and if that is the case then the court might not allow you to do that."

Bandile: "If that man still has any more dignity left as an African man with knowledge of his culture he will not involve other parties in this matter. This is more a cultural issue than a

western one. Tata we should go to Queenstown and see him."

Mrs B: "I don't know where he lives."

BANDile: "We will ask around until we find him, even if it takes us weeks."

Ma Mlandu: "No parent wants to hear their child is dead. I have made room for some disappointing news but to actually hear that she is really dead has hit me in a way that no parent should know. What was Bandla thinking when she ran off with that man."

Mr Mlandu: "It was young love, and forbidden love at that so the connection was too strong between them."

Mrs B: "Forbidden love? So the family did not want her to marry and that is why she ran off?"

Bandile: "Their union was a disgrace. Who marries their own relative? My mother's clan name is MamTshawe and Mziwakhe's is also Tshawe. In the Xhosa culture they are considered relatives. Nobandla knew that we would not let her get married to someone with the same clan name as our mother so she decided to

rebel and run off instead of obeying culture.", he shouted before taking a deep breath and breathing out slowly.

I finally found the reason why my friend ran away from home. She chose love over culture. I will not even dare to judge her situation because I have never been in such a predicament. It would explain why they never told Ntombi the truth. Ntombi is quite familiar with her culture and I assume they did not want her to feel like a curse of some sort. I wonder what I would have done had I been in that

situation. Bandla made a choice and had to live with it. I told them about Ntombi and they were saddened to hear that she like her mother ran from home to be with a man. Her grandparents asked that I please not give up in trying to find her because their hearts and homes are open for her. I knew they would say that. Bandile on the other hand kept on saying how they should first do a ritual for Ntombi and slaughter a black goat before they can fully welcome her. Mr Mlandu put his son in his place before he could even finish talking. Mr Mlandu

said that he is the man of the house and if Bandile wants to give orders he should go do it in his wife with his wife and children. Bandile still had anger because of Nobandla, and I fear he is the one who will take it out on Ntombi. Ntombi did not choose to be born to parents who went against culture. She is innocent in all of this. I promised to look for Ntombi and tell her that her grandparents want her home. I'm sure that she will be happy to hear that.

NTOMBI

Today is the day that Liyema has been waiting for, the embryo will be transferred to my womb. Well not really because it will not get to that. I feel like a piece of my soul is sold to the devil with each day I am a part of this. The worst part is the fact that Liyema has been nothing but kind. He is a busy man but somehow always find a chance to listen to how my day was. His mother has been so supportive and has brought her grandson the most adorable baby grow outfit. It is in those moments when I feel like coming clean. These people are

getting excited about something that will not happen, not with my help anyway. I've met Liyema's younger brother and he is a character. His father has not come around nor called him since the day he came with his mother. I can see that it affects him that his father is not sportive. I can hear it in his voice too on those rare occasions when we talk about. He said their church will have another big gathering and I know that Zim and her mom will go. I miss them.

I got ready to go to the clinic. Liyema won't be able to come

with me because he has an important meeting which is good because I don't want him to come. I never thought that I Ntombi Poti would someday be a con woman. It is true when they say that one should never say never. I enjoy living in this cottage/backroom even if Liyema thinks it is too small. There was a knock on the door and I thought it is Ma Eu reminding me to have breakfast before I leave. She has also treated me with nothing but respect and kindness. The love she has for Liyema is clear for all to see. I opened the

door and was greeted by a smiling Mr Elephant.

Liyema: "Ready?", he asked cheerfully.

Ntombi: "I thought you called for a taxi to pick me up because of an important meeting"

Liyema: "Yes, but I cancelled that to come with you. You have been going to most of these appointments alone, Ntombi and I feel like it is unfair"

Ntombi: "I'm not your wife whose hand you need to hold, Liyema. You just bought my eggs and will rent my womb", I regretted my words

right after saying them. He looked down. "I'm sorry, I'm just nervous and I'm a bum of a person sometimes.", I said and he looked at me.

Liyema: "You're not an ass. I don't know how other men in the same situation as me did things, Ntombi. I have read stories and I realized that each did what felt right for them. This feels right for me. I want my boy to know how much I looked forward to having him and I appreciate you allowing me to make use of your body. Well use is not the right word, I don't mea..."

Ntombi: "Liyema, I understand. Please give me time to get ready", he smiled and nodded. I took the phone that Bonga gave me that was only allowed to have his number on it. I don't know what I will do because I thought it would just be me and that doctor that is in on Bonga's scam. The phone rang and went to voicemail. I tried once again and he finally picked up. I told him about what is going on and he just laughed and told me to stop being a coward. He told me to relax, that his guy knows what to do and hung up on me. I am sure

today is the day I will be going to jail for trying to scam an innocent man of his money. A man who has done nothing to me, Bonga, Wayne nor anyone involved in this. I'm disgusted by who I have become. I made my way to the main house to have breakfast there. Liyema offered to buy breakfast on our way. Ma Eu prayed before left and I was sure that hell is where I'm going for doing this to these people. The look of excitement and nervousness in Liyema's eyes crushed my spirit. We got into the car and he was playing his church hymns and would occasionally sing

along. His voice still hits part of my being that I did not even know where there. We got take away breakfast for me and I ate on our way to the clinic. I could not get much in. something felt off, I can't describe it. It was the same feeling I got the day Mrs B got hijacked and it had me worried but I once again chose to ignore my gut feeling. We arrived at the clinic and I was soon prepared for the procedure. A doctor that is not the one who is handling our case walked in. I thought he was coming to get something in the room and leave

but instead he introduced himself and said the case was handed to him because our usual doctor was in a car accident. I swear it felt like I was going to throw up.

Liyema said it is all fine with him. What should I do? My mind hit a complete blank. I could not even say I want to go to the bathroom because they gave me water to fill my bladder for this procedure. I'm surprised the urine has not come out by itself because I'm a nervous wreck.

DR: "Don't look so frightened, mam. I might be younger than your previous doctor but I have

done this many times. You are in safe hands", he said with a smile.

Liyema: "And I'm here too. Everything will be fine.", he smiled.

Dr: "Let us get to it then before your bladder burst. I looked at your file and I must say you are the healthiest woman I've ever encountered in a long while. Dr Thomas's reports in your file are great so I don't see why you won't be pregnant in few weeks", he said still smiling.

Liyema: "Are you okay?", he asked and looked at me. I just nodded.

Dr: I'm going to insert this speculum into your vagina. Your file says you have had a pap smear before so you should be familiar with this object. It is to open up your vagina so that I can have a better view of what I will be doing.", his words left Liyema's mouth wide open. I guess he pictured how this object will open my vagina.

I did not hear what else he said after that but I could see Liyema nodding while the doctor spoke. I accepted that there was nothing that I could do but let them do what is suppose to be

done which might lead to me getting pregnant only to lose the child right after. I knew something would go wrong and I was right. Bonga's doctor having an accident on the big day confirms that this is wrong. I looked at Liyema and I could not bring myself to break his heart. I was afraid that he would hate me, I hate me. I don't want him to lose faith in yet another woman because I know that his ex hurt him, I'm just not sure how and that changed his entire outlook on woman, well on a romantic level that is. I want

him to try again to have a child.. if I tell him the truth he will lose faith in the IVF process and might never want to try again. If I do this and get pregnant and lose the baby, he will be sad but he might try again with a different donor or I might not even get pregnant and then he can try finding another woman to do it for him. I want him to be a father someday. So I will not let him lose faith. I'm willing to risk doing this and hope that it will be unsuccessful. The doctor did what he was supposed to. It was uncomfortable but not painful.

Even if it was, I would have deserved it anyway. The procedure was over and I was taken to the recovery room and was told to lay on my back for about 30 minutes. Liyema never left my side. My guilt made me go quiet. It was guilt, fear and hatred for myself. I'm sure Mama is turning in her grave right now. This is not the woman she hoped I'd turn into to.

Liyema left the room and I took the chance to move around in bed and go against the laying on my back the doctor said I must do. This might help so I don't get

pregnant. I was able to go home after four hours and I still did not say a single word. I could see the look of concern on Liyema's face. Ma Eu offered me food but I asked to go rest. Liyema did not try to talk me into eating but allowed me my space. I started to do exercises and went against the doctor's rest orders. I exercised until it felt like I would collapse. I lowered myself to the floor and started to cry. There is a loving man in the main house who is most probably on his knees praying that I be pregnant, while I try my best to not make that

happen. No wonder good men like Liyema change for the worst and build walls around their hearts. It is women like me who turn their hearts to stone. There was a soft knock on the door. I went to wash my face and opened the door.

Liyema: "Were you crying? Please don't shut me out", he pleaded.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry for everything. You don't deserve this. This is the opposite of what a person who passed a psychology evaluation would do."

Liyema: "Screw the evaluation. You are not some machine with no emotions. This has been invasive and it is the first time you are being a surrogate. I'm not some jerk who expects you to just suck everything up and give me what I want, Ntombi. Investing in your well-being means investing in my baby's well being. If you are not okay he might have health issues"

Ntombi: "If I get pregnant. Please leave room for disappointment"

Liyema: "What would that say about my faith? My faith is not

weak, Ntombi. I hear what the doctors are saying and scientific facts but I know that life is not just black and white."

Ntombi: "I will fail you", I said and cried. He hugged me. It was not that robotic hug he gave me that day but a proper warm hug. Both arms tightly wrapped around my shoulders. I could hear his heart beat, that is how close we were to each other. No man has given me such a hug.

Liyema: "I hate thinking negatively and I hate thinking too far into the future. I'm a we will deal with it once we get to it

or rather if we get to it kind of man.", he said and I wangled myself out of his arms.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry. I'm just afraid that all your efforts and money would have gone to waste should I not be pregnant."

Liyema: "I will deal with it should it happen but I don't want to fill my mind with such right now. I'm happy today. This has been a year long process of doubts, finding the right people to work with, finding a suited egg donor of what I would want my child to possible look like, of trying to find

a surrogate. Then you appeared, perfectly suited. I'm grateful"

I don't know the type of lady who is deserving of this man. He asked if I wanted space or if he could come in and make me some food. I did not want to be rude or negative to him again today so I let him do what he wants. He came in and made us some lunch and even offered to give me a foot massage which I rejected. I sent Bonga countless messages because his phone was off but no reply. Well I'm sure Wayne told him about their doctor friend and now he fears that I will sing to

the police and implicate him. Which is what I should be doing but I'm not because I'm also afraid of going to jail. I don't want to be hated by Liyema. I don't want him to give up hope of having a child someday. We watched some movies and he just sat with me in silence. Bonga would have thrown a mug at me a long time ago because when I got quiet he would think I'm ignoring him. I can't wait for the doctor to confirm I'm not pregnant. I believe that I'm won't be. I can just feel it.

TWENTY

NTOMBI

To call what I am feeling guilt is an understatement. I feel evil, poor evil right down to my bones. Liyema does not deserve this. He has been praying that a baby be growing inside my womb since they did the embryo transfer. I on the other hand have been asking for the opposite. The things I'm willing to do out of fear of Bonga will make me end up in jail and once I die I will go to hell. I'm afraid that I might be pregnant and

lose the child. It might not be mine legally but I will still be crushed by that. I can not even begin to imagine what it will do to Liyema. Two weeks have gone by and the doctor set an appointment for us to go see him to have a pregnancy test done. It has literally all Liyema has been talking about. His excitement deepens my guilt to a point where I can not even sleep at night. I guess it's true that evil does not sleep. His mother has been treating me like a daughter so far, even took me out on lunch to get some fresh

air. Someone knocked on the door and I snapped out of my deep thoughts and went to open. Mrs Elephant stood in front of me looking beautiful. She greeted me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I do not deserve this woman and her son's kindness. I let her in and made rooibos tea for the both of us. We sat around the kitchen counter and said nothing to each other. We no longer have awkward silences but today was different. It was as if she had a secret to tell but is unsure about whether to say it or not.

Mrs E: "I was in the area and thought I should come see you guys", she said.

Ntombi: "This is your son's house, Ma. You need not explain why you are here. Is Ma Eunice not in the main house? Well come to think of it she said she has cakes to bake. I;m sure she has gone to buy ingredients"

Mrs E: "Eunice is busy ironing but she did mention that she will step out for an hour or so."

Ntombi: "Yes, I will help her bake for her church fundraiser. Maybe you can join us?"

Mrs E: "How do you feel about Liyema, Ntombi?", her question left me confused.

Ntombi: "In what way, Ma?", I asked to get more clarity.

Mrs E: "The type of man that he is"

Ntombi: "He is an amazing guy. A bit too intense but great to be around. I remember when I first met him, I thought he would be grumpy and intense all the time and he kinda was but once he is comfortable with, he becomes relaxed and makes a lot of jokes", I said and laughed.

Mrs E: "He was never one to laugh and smile a lot but when with you it seems to be second nature. Last week he was laughing so much that he tilted his head backwards while his mouth was wide open."

Ntombi: "We get along, Ma"

Mrs E: "He got along with his wife too before marrying her but I have never seen her make him laugh so much", she said and I felt slightly uncomfortable.

Ntombi: "Ma, I don't think he will like it when we talk about..."

Mrs E: "I hate her!. I'm sorry, Ntombi but I hate her with all I

have in me.", she said cutting me short and stood up. I did not know what to say.

Mrs E: "Uhm..", I was speechless.

Mrs E: "What that woman did to my boy is unforgivable. What makes it worse is the fact that a part of me blames my husband for this. I told him that to let Liyema and that...that woman get married was a mistake but he did not listen.", she said with anger.

Ntombi: "We don't always have control over what happens, Ma"

Ms E: "That's the thing, we had control in that instance. His father added pressure on him and I did nothing."

Ntombi: "Liyema was an adult, Ma"

Mrs E: You will be surprised how much control a person can have over the choices you make just because they hold the upper hand. Liyema's father threatened to cut my child off and for a child like Liyema who grew up being spoon fed it was a hard pill to swallow. Get married and be financially free or don't get married and go live in the street.

If only she knew that I know personally what it is like to have someone have a hold over you and control you and makes you do things you don't want to. I guess this woman did more damage for Mrs Elephant to hate her. She meant it, I could see it in her eyes and I wonder what this woman has done to make such a lovely woman harbor hate. I remained quiet because I felt like she needed to vent. She was not just in the area and decided to pop in. she came from her house straight here to get what is on her chest off. I sat and listened.

Mrs E: "I can't talk details about what happened with Zingisa. All I can say is that girl broke my son", she said and cried.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry, Ma", I said in a whisper.

Mrs E: "It is fine. This baby might seal the cracks in his heart. Especially after Lulongke died", she said in a whisper, almost as if she did not want me to hear that part but I did.

Ntombi: "Lulongke?", I asked and she looked at me.

Mrs E: "I have to go. Thank you for listening", she said quickly

before she stood and made her way to the door.

I followed her but she was out before I could reach her. Who is Lulonke? Could she have something to do with Liyema's mom hating his ex wife? My mind was once again filled with questions about business that had absolutely nothing to do with me. Had I not known better I would have thought Mrs Elephant was trying to hook me up with Liyema with the whole "What do you think about Liyema?" question but luckily I know better. I was about to close

my door when Mrs Elephant appeared again. She begged me not to tell Liyema that she mentioned Lulonke or spoke about Zingisa. I just nodded. She thanked and hugged me before disappearing from my sight once again. Could Lulonke have been Zingisa and Liyema's child that has dies and Zingisa is responsible for it. Could this baby be a replacement child for a child Liyema might have lost? My head was buzzing with questions and I decided to mind my own business. I'm not here to know about the

deep personal issues of Liyema and his family.

LIYEMA

Two weeks have gone by and I have been waiting to find out if the IVF was a success or not. A part of me thinks that it is.

Ntombi looks different, she is glowing or perhaps it is all just my imagination making me see what I want. I have not been able to focus at work. I can see myself playing with my boy already. I hope that I will be a father that he deserves. I know I will have to explain a lot to him once he is old enough to

understand the things that goes on around him. He will have questions about who his mother is and why she is not a part of our lives and I will be honest with him about everything. I read a story about a man who has done what I am doing before and he is raising a happy little girl. It will not always be sunshine and roses but it will be worth it.

Vusi sat across me talking non stop about I don't know what. I could see his big mouth moving but I was in my own world.

Vusi: "Liyema!", he said while banging the table.

Liyema: "Sounds good man", I said and he raised his hands in the air and shook his head.

Vusi: "How could losing an account be good news, bra? It was not a cash cow but this client was one of our very first"

Liyema: "We have lost a few deal over the two years we have been in business and that has just made us hustle harder. This is no different. You are just sad

because you won't deal with Mr Xakwa's daughter all the time since her father made her deal with his company's adverting.

Vusi: "Do you blame me, bra? Have you seen that girl?"

Liyema: "Not really my type but she is a pretty lady. You stop being a coward and go ask her out. The end of our business relationship with her does not mean you can't pursue a romantic one with her."

Vusi: "Whatever! Anyway what is your type?"

Liyema: "Uhm...you know"

Vusi: "Uhm...you know what? I don't know jack."

Liyema: "I have to go home. I don't feel well"

Vusi: "You don't get sick. I'm the

one who is suppose to come up with lies to stay away from work, not you", he aid and we both laughed.

Liyema: "One day we won't have to come in when we don't feel like it because we would have enough business and a bigger and will just delegate amongst our team.

Vusi: "Then I can finally impress Miss Xakwa by spoiling her"

Liyema: "She is used to money. Think of other ways to "spoil" her. I;m out!"

Vusi: Liyema bra, I know you're excited about this and can already

see yourself teaching your boy to play ball and I'm excited too but please make room for some bad news. You don't know if this girl is pregnant or not. She might not be and I want you to be mentally and emotionally prepared for that too.", he said with concern.

Liyema: "Thanks, man. So can I go?"

Vusi: "You are here most times so just get the hell out of here. You did not have to lie and say you are feeling sick. I'll try not to burn the place down", he joked and we laughed.

I don't know why I want to go home earlier today. Maybe it is because the office is not busy or because I'm not present there mentally. Our media agency is not that big yet, it is only two years old but business is good. I drove past a pharmacy and decided to go purchase myself some multi vitamins. I have been feeling tired lately. I think I work too much and I need to slow down now because soon my time won't belong to myself. I went in and took what I wanted and walked past the home pregnancy tests. There was a variety of them. I

took one and read what was written on the box. I wanted to take It and have Ntombi take the test but decided against it because I did not want to rush her. I put the box back down and went to the tills. I stood in the short line waiting for my turn to pay. Something just made me turn back and go take a pregnancy test. I paid for everything and went home. I found the ladies busy with some baking and Ma Eunice gave me a task the second she saw me walk in. I asked to rest a bit first and she understood. Ntombi seemed

different today, not in a bad way but her eyes were filled with pity when she looked at me. Ma Eunice told me my mother was here and went straight to Ntombi and I wondered if she has anything to do with why Ntombi is looking at me as if I'm a stray dog seeking pity. I excused myself because I did not feel it was the right moment to ask her to take the test. I don't know what is wrong with her because she said she is fine and that my mother did not say anything to offend her but she is not herself. Could it be pregnancy hormones? I don't like

seeing her down. I hate to admit but she has somehow just found a way into my heart. I don't know if I have feelings for her. I can't have feelings for her but all I know is she makes the house feel a bit less empty. I can't get attached though because it will be a dangerous attachment. I don't know what is happening between us. I think we both would love to be friends with each other and had circumstances been different, we could have been but just not now, not with everything going on. How will I explain to my boy someday that Daddy's good

friend "aunt" Ntombi is his biological mother. It is best that we keep our relationship as it is. I went to rest and woke up feeling a bit rested. I was shocked to see the sun was already going down. I made my way to the kitchen to drink some water and stood thinking about whether I must ask Ntombi to take the test or not. She walked in just as I was thinking about her holding a plate.

Ntombi: "I cooked and made a bit extra because I figured that you would not be in the mood for cooking.", she said with a smile.

Liyema: "Thank you. I was hoping to get some cake too", she laughed.

Ntombi: "Ma Eunice promised to bake us one but said those are for her church but I was able to make two cupcakes from the left over batter", she said and I laughed.

Liyema: "So you were given the bowl to lick but instead decided to make cupcakes from it? Wow, that is a first", we both laughed.

Ntombi: "Hey I at least thought of you so be grateful."

Liyema: "Thank you for that. I'm sure they taste yummy and thank you for the food as well", I said and she nodded. We looked at each other for a long while before I cleared my throat.

Ntombi: "Are you feeling well rested now?"

Liyema: "Much better than earlier. How was your day? You seem off."

Ntombi: "I've got too much on my mind. I also saw the pregnancy test on your bed when Ma Eunice asked me to go check up on you. Would you like me to take it?", she

asked. I felt like kicking myself for leaving it on my bed like that but Ntombi hardly goes up the stairs.

Liyema: "No, let us wait for our appointment tomorrow."

Ntombi: "I'm curious to know what the results are, Liyema and you buying the test tells me that you do too so lets do this"

I was not about to act as if what she said is not music to my ears. I'm glad that she is as impatient as me in this matter. I went upstairs to my bedroom to take the test. I'm bursting with excitement. I told her what the

instructions said must be done and she disappeared into the bathroom. She appeared after a while, put the test on the table and is looking nervous as hell. I don't know why but I took both her hands and kissed them. They were soft and smelled soapy. She is as shocked as I am about my sudden affection, yet neither of us let go, instead her grip around my hands tightened. I looked at our hands and they seemed to be a perfect match. I can not explain the closeness I felt to just by holding her hands. The beeping of my phone interrupted the

moment, talk about perfect timing. I put a stopped to the annoying beep sound from my phone while she took the stick. Ntombi came to stand in front of me. I held her wrists while she held the white and purple stick. We both looked at the little window area and it had one clear blue stripe. I check the box again and one stripe meant that it was negative. I felt a pain deep in my gut that I could not explain. It felt as though my entire world has collapse. I have put so much hope and prayed so much about this that I thought that it

would be a reality. Ntombi kept on apologizing endlessly. I'm not angry at her nor do I blame her. It was just not meant to happen. I don't know if I will ever be able to do this again. I should accept that I'm not meant to have a child.

Mtombi: "You can try again with a different woman, Liyema"

Liyema: "No this was it for me. Maybe my father was right. This is no way to conceive a child."

Ntombi: "I'm sorry", she said softly.

Liyema: "Can we remain friends?
I admit that I have come to
enjoy your company. I don't kn...

Ntombi: "NO!", she said before I
could finish my sentence.

My phone rang and it was a
private number. There is nothing
I hate more than being called
with a private number but as a
businessman I need to take most
calls because it might be new
business. A man who preferred to
remain anonymous spoke. I was
about to hang up but did not
after he said it is about
Ntombikayise Poti. I looked to
where Ntombi is standing. She is

holding the pregnancy test looking bit confused. I guess she does not understand how it can be a negative after all the money spend and effort given by all involved but I did not care care the money. I went to the other room to listen carefully to this man. He told me that Ntombi can not be trusted and that I should call her and put him on speaker. Who is this man ordering me around? Tonight was not the right time but he insisted, almost begged. I went back to the lounge where Ntombi stood still looking at the test. I called her

and she looked at me. She was about to open her mouth to say something when the man on the other side of the line stopped her. Her mouth remained open and it seemed as though she has seen a ghost. The man started to tell how Ntombi almost had him killed with her lies. He spilled more beans and told me how I got conned by the woman in front of me. I switched the phone off and looked at Ntombi who is by this stage sopping. I asked her what the man meant and she confessed to everything. I can not believe that I was made to look like a

fool for these people. Ntombi lied about everything. The woman I had just asked to be my friend is fake. I felt like I was back to the dark place Zingisa placed me in years ago, but this time it felt worse. Ntombi tried to explain and I should have been angry. I should be calling the cops on her con ass and be throwing stuff around while shouting but instead I sank into the couch silently and slowly. I looked at the beautiful woman who managed to put a smile on my face after years of mopping around. I realized that I'm not throwing things around in

anger because I'm hurt because I have already gotten attached to her. She stood in front of me looking like life has been sucked out of her. How can such a beautiful being be so evil? I was at a loss for words. The two of us looked at each other and my vision became blurry. I stood and walked to the door.

Liyema: "By the time I get back, I want you gone", I finally managed to say.

Ntombi: "Call the police, Liyema. I will confess to them too. I'm really sorry. I should never have agreed to it. Call the po..."

Liyema: "Be gone by the time I return."

I walked out the front door and banged it hard. I should be calling the cops, my mind knows it but a part of me deep down just does not want to get her into trouble. Why the hell am I such a damn softy of a man? What about me makes these women want to step on my heart as if it does not feel? I was not thinking clearly and a part of me was worried about where Ntombi would go because in her brief confession she said something about having no one. Why do I care? Why is it that

when people hurt me I still care? If I did not know better I would have thought her tears were real but I know they aren't. I was looking forward to meeting her son too and to hear that part is also not true just hurt more. I can't believe that I left everything to Wayne, it is unlike me to just trust like that but he seemed like a good man. A man with principles but then again so did Ntombi. It is amazing what people would do for a quick buck, even if it means stealing from a person who worked hard to earn their money. I can already hear

my father laughing at me. I did not listen much to Ntombi's excuses to doing this. All I know is that I was made a fool by a woman I cared about once again. I thought I had closed all roads leading to my heart but she carved her way to it anyway. I think I was in love with her. No, the correct term is I am in love with her. Why can't I hate her? With Zingisa I was disgusted when she did what she did to me. I hated her for years after that and I knew her longer than I knew Ntombi. I got into my car and sped off. I'm sure the hate

will come soon, it has to. No woman will ever take me for a fool again. They keep on going on about there aren't any good men in the world. Have they ever thought that they the women are to blame for that? Good men exist we are just too broken and afraid to love wholeheartedly again. No woman will ever know what my love is like. I know I said the same thing after Zingisa but my heart betrayed me. I will never be controlled by emotions again.

TWENTY ONE

NTOMBI

The look of pure pain in Liyema's eyes will be something I will never get out of my mind. I have hurt a man who was willing to keep me in his life as a friend because he thought I'm important enough for him to do so. I should have been sitting in a cold cell right now waiting to be trailed for what I did but Liyema just let me go. I thought that he would beat the hell out of me when he heard Bonga tell him everything over the phone. I gave him enough reason to do so. Bonga hit me for

not talking to him after he insulted me yet here is a man who has wasted his time and money because of me yet he did not even push me. I would have loved to be his friend but I have ruined all chances of that happening. I'm sure he hates me with passion, I hate me with passion. I deserve to be punished for what I did and I'm sure karma will ensure that happens. I'm glad that the test was negative because it was what I was hoping for. Had it not been for Bonga, Liyema and I would have gone our different ways without anyone getting

hurt. He was disappointed when he saw the one strip instead of two but a part of him must have known that the test might come out negative. I'm sure he thanks the heaven for it being negative. The tension between us would have made it difficult for me to carry on being his surrogate mother and if he knew that the baby would not have made it anyway he would not have invested much in the entire thing. One day I will get a job and start saving so that I can pay him back all the money he

compensated me with. It will take years but I will do so.

I went to the cottage as soon as Liyema stepped out of the door. If I waited until he was back to explain my reasons for doing what I did he would surely have killed me or made sure I rot in prison. I packed the clothes that I came with and left all else that Mrs Elephant bought for me. She had already bought me some pretty maternity wear that I could have worn even after giving birth. I'm glad I kept some of the money I got even if most went into Bonga's pocket. This

money will be enough for a bus ticket to wherever, some food while on the road and perhaps even for a cheap overnight stay at a backpackers. I don't even know where I'm going but all I want is to be far away from Cape Town. This is a beautiful city but for me it comes with traumatizing memories. I doubt I will ever set foot here again. I was on a taxi going to the bus station to book a ticket. When I went out with Mrs Elephant she took me to a few places and I remember seeing a long distance bus station. The taxi driver

offered to drop me off right at the station since I was his last passenger for the day. We share the same clan name so he kept on saying I should call him Malume and I did not mind. I know how important clan name relatives are to the Xhosa people. He dropped me off safely, said I must greet the other Tshawe's at home and gave me money to buy food on the road. I did not feel worthy at all. I thanked him and made my way inside. The little windows where I wanted to ask information from where all closed. I asked the security what was going on and

he told me that the staff had gone home, that only himself and the people waiting for their buses to arrive are left. He told me that I will only be able to make a booking tomorrow. My heart sank. I thanked him and went to sit next to an elderly woman. The phone I had rang and Bonga's name appeared on the screen. Can't this man let me go? Has he not done enough damage already? I answered anyway for reasons unknown to myself.

Ntombi: "What?"

Bonga: "Aren't you in jail? I thought the fool would get you

arrested or did you hurt the man and fled? If you fled, may you enjoy life on the streets because you are nothing without me.", he said and laughed.

Ntombi: "Life will deal with you itself, Bonga. I would rather sleep under a bridge than come back to you."

Bonga: "You will be back, I know. I'm sure you are wondering why I changed my plans. I was sitting and just wondering about whether I'm punishing you enough for what you did to me and I realized that I was not. I was still sitting in a shack filled

with holes waiting for you to give me the little money you gave me while you were in the suburbs. You were in paradise while I was still in hell. There were times I would wait outside when you said you had an appointment and I would watch you with that fool. He has a thing for you. It was only a matter of time before you talked and made yourself a victim so I thought let me talk for you and make him see just what a witch you really are. I could not stay in hell while you were in paradise. I hope you will enjoy your life under a bridge. I hope it rains non stop

for an entire month and have you get so sick that you die and go to hell."

Ntombi: "At least I know that you will follow me to hell soon enough", my words left the lady next to me looking shocked.

Bonga: "Good then I will make your life hell in hell too. I will make you suffer every time life makes me run into you, Ntombi. The nightmare you will never wake up from.", he said and laughed again before ending the call.

Elderly lady: "Why are you crying?", said a voice next to me. I had not realized that I'm crying.

Ntombi: "It is nothing, Ma", I lied and even faked a smile.

Elderly: "I'm Mambele. What is your name?", she asked with a warm smile.

Ntombi: "Ntombikayise, Ma."

Mambele: "I might not know what you are going through, Yise but what I do know is that darkness does not remain forever", her words made me cry even more for various reasons but

mostly because no one has ever called me Yise, only my mother did. Ntombi: "My darkness is forever, Makhulu. I can not remember the last time I felt a light shine on my life. But I don't blame anyone. I'm here because of the choices I made. I'm crying because I have no one to blame but myself"

Mambele: "To see a beautiful young lady who has her entire life ahead of her talk like that breaks my heart. You must have known pain from a young age while other children were playing without any care in the world and for that I'm sorry", she said

softly. No one has apologized to me for my childhood traumas.

Ntombi: "Thank you, Makhulu."

Mambele: "I also don't know who you were talking to over the phone but if someone brings out more bad from you than good then you need to let them go. The lady that was speaking on the phone and the lady who is speaking to me now are two different people. That person clearly brings out the bad in you because you sounded cold and rude but now you are warm and soft. I can feel that you are a good person and all the goodness of life is

going to come to you but you need to cut ties with what is not serving you.", she said while looking at me.

Ntombi: "You are right, Ma"

Mambele: "Where are you going?"

Maybe we will be on the same bus."

Ntombi: "I don't know. I think I..."

Her phone rang before I could finish. She asked to quickly answer it and I just smiled and nodded. The way she spoke loudly on the phone made me laugh a bit because almost everyone is now

looking at her. She did not have a care in the world. The person on the other side of the phone does not seem to have good news because she went from looking excited about receiving the call to having a frown on her face. She spoke some more and smiled again. I could not help but smile too though I don't know what made her so happy. Mambele ended the call and turned to look at me still smiling.

Mambele: "I'm sorry, child. That was my grandson. I wanted to surprise him with a visit but it turns out that he has come to

Cape Town to surprise me with one", she said and laughed softly.

Ntombi: "Then you better go home, Makhulu. I'm sure he is standing at the door already"

Mambele: His bus will arrive here in a few minutes. We will be going home together", she smiled.

Ntombi: "What a great coincidence. What are the odds of that happening?"

Mambele: "I don't believe in coincidences. I believe that things happen because they were meant to. There is a reason why he wanted to surprise me and a

reason why his bus departed earlier than mine. He has been looking for work for such a long time now. I have a feeling this visit will turn into a permanent stay.", she said with a smile.

Ntombi: "I hope Cape Town will treat him with kindness but with you by his side everything will be well"

Mambele: "God will lead us. So where are you going. It seems the possibility of us being in the same bus and getting to know each other has now gone but I will give you my number so that when you are back you can call me",

she said while taking out a pen and wrote her number in my hand. Ntombi: "I'm not sure where I'm going, Makhulu. Every family member wants me to go to their house and they live in different towns so I'll decide tomorrow when I book my bus", I lied with a smile.

Mambele: "Does some of that family perhaps live in Peddie? I have a ticket for a bus that will arrive in thirty minutes"

Ntombi: "I do, Ma but we are not really on good terms", I lied again but how do I say my

grandparents don't even know me?

Ma Mbele: "Like I have said things happen for a reason. I was suppose to go to Peddie to my grandchild but instead he came to me. Something made you choose to sit next to me and I have a ticket for a trip going to Peddie where your family you are not on good terms with live. I think this means that you must get on that bus and go fix things. How are they related to you?"

Ntombi: "They are my grandparents, Makhulu"

Mambele: "My babe, that means they are old by now and most probably have forgiven whatever it is you did that hurt them or it is time that you forgive them if they were the ones who wronged you. Life is short and even more so for old people like myself. My grandchildren are my life and not having them in my life would break me. I'm sure they are in pain and want you back in their lives."

Ntombi: "You are right, Ma but won't me getting on with your ticket be an issues?"

Mambele: "I doubt it. Just give my name when you get on so that the driver can scratch it off to indicate that "I" have boarded the bus", she said in a whisper.

Ntombi: "What if there is ID number details and such. I'm sure the driver will see it can't be my age"

Mambele: "Men know better than to ask for a woman's age and if they ask just say "black does not crack""", she said and I laughed at the confidence she said it with.

"Ntombi: "How much will the ticket be?"

Mambele: Nothing at all. Take it, get on that bus and call your grandparents to tell them that you are coming home. That is thank you enough to me.

Something tells me you are alone in this city and I want you to go and receive all the love they are going to give you. Anger fades as we get older. They are not angry anymore but I'm sure they are wondering where you are"

I'm not one to really believe in everything happens for a reason but she made me believe for a while. Perhaps everything is aligned. She gave me her ticket

saving me some money. Once again I did not feel worthy. Everything in my should have been going wrong after what I did yet here I am meeting kind people who help me. I decided to to trust the woman. A part of me was afraid that the driver would accuse me of stealing a ticket and then I would go to jail for sure. I took the ticket and looked at the name so I could say it when the driver asks for my name. Nobandla Sali was written on it. I don't know why but it felt as though my mother was with me. I could not explain it but Mambele's name

being Nobandla and her giving me a ticket to Peddie made it feel like my mother was in control and wanted me to trust the signs she is giving me. I thanked Mambele and hugged her. She said her grandson sent a message saying his bus has arrived. She asked me to look after her bags while she goes to the bus to welcome him. I sat and waited for her to return. She came back with a young teenage boy, whom I guess to be 19 years or so. She introduced the two of us and he seems like a decent young man. I hope that he will not give his granny problems.

The townships of Cape Town can be a bad place for a young boy because they are forced into these gangs. Mambele wished me the best of luck with my journey and asked that I open my heart and mind when I'm with my grandparents. The two of them left me and I felt rather sad. I looked at the ticket and the bus is suppose to arrive in five minutes. I have no idea of where I'm going or what lies ahead. I did not even ask Mambele if she is from Peddie, maybe she knows my grandparents. I looked at my hand, took out my phone and

saved her number. I now have four numbers on this phone, Bonga's, Liyema's, Liyema's mom's and Mambele. I saved changed Bonga's name to Satan under his number. I won't delete it because I want to ignore the call should he call but it seems he has stopped obsessing over me because had he still been, he would have waited outside Liyema's house for me to come out after he spilled all the rotten beans. My bus arrived and I took my medium sized bag and made my way to it. I first asked if it is the right bus and the driver said

yes. They took my luggage and put it in the bottom part of the bus. The last time I was on a long distance trip was when Bonga took me from home to here. I'm feeling scared and nervous. My grandparents don't know me nor do they know about me. I hope they do not question my relation to them but Mrs B said I look like my mother so surely they will see I'm one of them. I heard Peddie is not such a big place. I will ask around for Solomzi and Nolitha Mlandu's home. I'm sure I will be unsuccessful for a few days but I

did not have to spend on my ticket so I might be able to find accommodation for a few days. My plan was to go to a place that had better job opportunities because I wanted to be independent but perhaps I need to do this first. The fact that I'll be arriving empty handed brought me shame but I can not do anything about the situation. I hope they don't see yet another burden when they meet me. I got on the bus and found the driver sitting in his seat with a clipboard that had a list of names on it. He asked who I am and I

confidently said "Nobandla Sali". My heart was beating at an alarming rate. The man did not even look at me. He just make a mark next to the name Nobandla Sali and told me my seat number. The bus is not full. I found my seat and sank into it. I thought that someone will come sit next to me but the bus drove off without that happening. I sent Mambele a text thanking her again and asking if she perhaps knew the Mlandu family. She replied shortly after saying no, she does not. I felt a bit disappointed. I guess my luck has run out. I will have

to ask around when I get there. At least Mrs B told me the area she and my mom grew up in so that is a start. Even if they moved I'm sure the neighbors might know where to. The bus will be arriving in Peddie tomorrow morning. I sat and thought about Liyema again. Not in the I'm in love and can't get him out of my mind way but in a I'm worried about the damage the pain I caused him might do. I hope he realized that I'm not worth him ruining his life for. I know that he will never forgive me but I do pray that he will

continue to try having the child he wants so much. I pray that he falls in love with a woman worthy of the love he gives and that they have lots and lots of babies together. I'm sure God will grant him all the happiness in the world because he has a good heart. I could not sleep well. I bought some food when we made a stop at the garage but I did not want to waste money so I bought just enough to keep me going. I have become a fan of Liyema's clean eating. My body feels great and it improved my mood and my energy levels

improved. I would recommend clean eating to everyone but for me that life is over. I put my earphone in my ears and put the radio on. I fell asleep somewhere between the thoughts that dominated my mind.

An annoying light shone right in my face forcing me to open my eyes, it's the sun. I can not believe that it's morning already. I stretched my arms out trying to see where I am. I don't know where about it is because the bus was passing the middle of nowhere. I became more and more nervous as the bus drove closer to

my destination. I can't believe I slept through the night on this uncomfortable bus seat. After some time the bus made its way into Peddie. I have heard of the place but never been. The bus stopped and it was time for me to get off. I suddenly did not want to. I got off and got my luggage. I held on to my bags tightly because my handbag had all the money I have in it and my suitcase all the clothes I own, I can not afford to lose either. I asked where I could find a taxi that goes to Kwandlambe village and some guy was helpful and

took me exactly to the spot where I could find the right transport from town to the village. Being here reminded me so much of home. The place is different obviously but there is some familiarity to it. I got onto the taxi and had to wait until it got full. It finally filled up and drove off. I don't have a plan and I have no strength to think of one. I will accept matters as they come and hope for the best. I asked the people next to me if they knew the Mlandu's. They knew a family with the surname but the names did not match

those of my grandmother and grandfather. I asked the driver to drop me off when some lady said we have arrived at Kwandlambe. I stepped out of the taxi and stood there not knowing what to do next. There were houses so I decided to begin my door to door journey as exhausted as I am. Some people were kind enough to talk to me and would lead me to houses that were not the one I'm looking for. Some would not even let me in. there were a few kind people who gave me water to drink. I sat on a big rock on the side of the road

after about an hour of looking for the right house. Perhaps they moved to another village. I stood and walked by the side walk trying to find a taxi back to town so I could find a place to sleep for tonight. I felt pathetic because I only searched for about an hour and gave up but I'm too tired to deal with this. I felt defeated. A car approached but I doubt it is a taxi. I kept on walking when the car but the car slowed down as it came closer and closer to me. My heart started to beat fast because it might be thugs who might take my money. I put on a

brave face and continued to walk. I did not even look at the driver while the car slowly drove pass me. "Ntombi?", said a female voice. I quickly turned my head to the right to look at the driver, it's Mrs B. I have never been so happy to see anyone in my life before. She stopped the car and ran to hug me. She took a good look at my face I guess to check if Bonga has not hurt me. She started crying and my tears followed soon after. She held onto with dear life. She asked me so many questions and I planned on answering all of them in due time.

I told her why I'm in Peddie and promised to tell her the entire story when we have time. She quickly took my suitcase and put it in the car because people had started to come out of their houses to see what was happening. She told me that she came to see my parents to give them the news about my mom's passing and decided to remain in her family home for a bit longer to recover from the stresses of the city. Mrs B asked if she should take me to my grandparents house or to her father's house just to rest and

eat a bit. I asked her to take me to my grandparents because I have come this far so I might as well just get it over and done with. She told me they wanted to have my mother's body dug up and moved to Peddie. I don't know how I feel about that because she was married to my father and my father had full right to bury his wife. Mrs B said I will understand more when my grandparents explain. It sounds as though I will be welcomed by drama and I don't have the strength to do so. Mrs B also mentioned how much my

grandparents want to meet me. We arrived and she told me that everything will be fine. I wanted to believe her but we don't know that for sure. An elderly man walked out of the house towards the gate. Mrs B said it's my grandfather. I could not help but smile. Mrs B asked that I step out of the car and I did. I waited for her to come stand by my side. The old man greeted her but his eyes never left my face.

Grandpa: "Nobandla?", he said while standing closer to get a good look.

Mrs B: "This is Ntombikayise, Tata, Nobandla's child I told you about", her word made my grandfather cry.

Grandpa: "Had I not known better and I passed you randomly, I would have thought you were Nobandla, my child. How are you?", he asked and took out a white cloth from his back pocket to wipe the tears off his face.

Ntombi: "I'm well, Tamkhulu and you?", I said with tears rolling down my cheeks. He wiped my tears with the same cloth he used to wipe his.

He did not get a chance to tell me how he is doing because a woman came running from the house towards us. I realized that Mrs B had went inside to get her. She must be my grandmother because my mother resembles her a lot. I was In her tight grip before I could even say anything to her. She held me while crying and thanking God and the ancestors. My grandfather also wrapped his arms around me. I was sandwiched between them and felt overwhelmed by the love and affection that I got. Nothing mattered in that moment. I

know that I might face some drama while here but if they continue to shower me with such love I will get through anything. The three of us just stood that way and cried. The fact that my grandfather thought I was his daughter warmed my heart. I love that people think I look like her because she was a beauty. I've never received a hug that made the entire world seem like it does not exist and to get it felt great. I suddenly believed what Mambele said that everything happens for a reason. I feel a few broken pieces being mended

already and that was exactly what I needed to feel. I needed to feel safe and welcome. I will fix my life and then go humble myself before Liyema and his family and ask for forgiveness.

TWENTY TWO

LIYEMA

A week has gone by since what Ntombi did to me, week filled with too many questions. I told my mother about what happened and it almost sounded like she was defending Ntombi. She kept on

asking questions like, "why would she leave all the expensive clothes that I bought her when she could have sold it and made money?". It came as a shock to me because my mother is usually ready to go to war when me and brother have been hurt, she has been like that since we were kids, yet here she is justifying Ntombi's actions. I guess I'm not the only one whose heart chose Ntombi because my mother seemed to enjoy hr company a lot.

I went to Wayne's office to confront him and they told me that he was admitted to hospital

a few days ago after suffering a heart attack. Apparently inappropriate pictures of him are all over social media and it became too much for him to bare. I asked which hospital he was in because I wanted to hear the truth about what happened with my own ears. I want to know why he and Ntombi chose my case when there are hundreds of people who make use of their surrogacy services. I wanted to know who Ntombi really is, what brought the two of them together and what the end goal to all of this was?. When I went to see him I

found a weak looking man but I did not care because they do care when they made me a fool. I'm happy to see that he was awake because he had a lot of questions to answer.

Wayne: 'You can finish me if you want, Mr Elephant. I will not even out up a fight. I don't have much to live for anymore anyway'. He said softly while looking at me with weak eyes.

Liyema: "Don't you fucken dare throw that pity talk at me. You can die for all I care but don't think for one second that I will be the one to do it. You deserve to

feel the way that you do after what you did to me. I have questions and you will answer all of them or there will be hell to pay", I said in anger while pointing my finger at him.

Wayne: "Ask", he said and I sat on the chair next to his bed.

Liyema: "What made you people take an interest on me? Of all the people who make use of your services, why choose my case?"

Wayne: "I would be to blame for all of that, Mr Elephant. I had too much to deal with at home and decided to go to my usual

drinking hole in the township. When I got there I saw an acquaintance I met at that tavern a few months ago. He offered to drink with me and I became too drunk and started venting. I complained about my family and you added to my stress with your requirements about the type of surrogate you wanted. I just could not understand why you could not choose from the list of Caucasian women, you kept pushing for me to find an African one. The more I told you because your egg donor is a black woman, your kid would be black too no

matter the color of the surrogate but you kept on. I complained about you with this acquaintance because I did not think he had any use for the information anyway but I was wrong.", he said calmly.

Liyema: "Who the hell is this acquaintance?"

Wayne: "Some man known to me only as De Bongz. I don't know his full name but I imagine it to be Bongani or something"

Liyema: "Then what happened?"

Wayne: "We went our separate ways promising to hang out again

soon and days went by and life was normal until he called me to meet up with him. He then told me that he wanted me to be a part of a plan to bring us some money."

Liyema: "And I was to be that cash machine?", I laughed in disbelief.

Wayne: "I suspect that he thought this thing would bring a lot of money to him and the lady who was helping him. I refused at first, Mr Elephant but he placed me between a rock and a hard place. Uhm..I'm a man who...uhm who enjoy the company

of other men and he got pictures of me while being in the company of another man. It was either I agreed to the blackmail or lose my wife and family. I come from a strict Muslim family and community and had I been in another state what I had done would have been punishable with dea..."

Liyema: "Do I look like I care about what you do in your private time? He blackmailed you, you gave into it, you managed to make me trust every recommendation you gave me and then what?"

Wayne: "And then we got the ball rolling by creating a good enough file for Ntombi.", his words made me laugh.

Liyema: "So you did not run any test on her? You were willing to make a woman that might be sick carry my child?", I looked at the ceiling trying to keep calm.

Wayne: "The plan was to fake the embryo transfer."

Liyema: "Well it was not fake, you bastard. A different doctor whom I assume knows nothing about this did the transfer. She could have been pregnant with my child

as we speak. A woman whose health history we know nothing about!", I shouted.

Nurse: "Sir, if this is how you conduct yourself I suggest that you leave please", he said while standing at the door.

Wayne: "Everything is fine, nurse", he gave the nurse a reassuring nod.

Nurse: "Visiting time is almost over anyway so be quick", he ordered and went back out.

Wayne: "I'm sorry for my part in this, sir. I had no other choice. I also assume that the lady did not

have much of a choice. The way she spoke told me she was against it but this De Bongz had something on her too. I have heard on numerous times how he spoke to her like she was nothing. I have once seen him slap her while they were waiting for me in my office. I think she was forced to do it because she is afraid of him. Did you at any point feel like she could be a bad person during her stay with you?", he asked.

I stood to leave making promises to have him and his acquaintance pay for what they did. He practically begged me to open a

case against him because he felt prison would be much better than having to face the shame he would be facing on the outside. I sat in my car for a long while thinking about what the right way to deal with this would be. If I plan revenge then what would that say about me and my christian values? If I get them arrested then Ntombi is going to be too? Why do I even care about what happens to her? Could she really have been forced into this??

NTOMBI

Life so far has not been bad but it has not been bad either. I

have met my uncle, his wife and three kids too. Makhulu has been spoiling me rotten. My cheeks have gotten round as a result. They are lovely people but I still can not help but feel like I'm burdening them. I have been sensing tension when it comes to my uncle. Its almost if though he is pretending to be kind to me. No one has told me why my mother left such a loving home. Mrs B has gone back to Cape Town and has been calling everyday since. I think she fears that I will go back to Bonga. I have no desire to go back to that evil man and I

can only hope that he feels the same. It seems my mother had her father's reserved personality. My grandfather is not a man of many words. My grandma on the other hand is a chatterbox. They are like twins, when one goes to town or to the shop the other would go with. My grandma might have a louder personality than my grandfather but I have not once witnessed her trying to go above his head and control him. When her husband speaks she listens. They are lovely people which makes me wonder even more why Nobandla decided to run away. Did

my father promise her a better life like Bonga did with me? I've also been thinking about Liyema. I think the feeling of guilt will consume me until the end of my days. My grandparents sat me down like a child and told me to explain why I ran away from home. It seems Mrs B did not tell them everything. I told them what had driven me to run away from home with a man. My story left tears in my grandfather's eyes and anger in my grandmother's. I've also noticed that Mr Mlandu is not a man who can hide his emotions. His tears

come easier when he is sad. My grandmother threatened to make Nomvula pay for what she had done to me and also make my father pay. I told her that my father did not know anything but she told me that a parent can see when their child is not well. Said that my father saw the bruised I tried to hide from him but he was just afraid of making his wife upset. I don't know if that was true. I have never been angry at him for what his wife did. How could I when he did not know and how would he have known when I kept quiet for years on end?

I made breakfast for the three of us and we sat and ate. I feel at peace here. There is no shouting, no drunk or high people causing trouble. The only noise there is, is those of cows and dogs.

Ntombi: "Makhulu and Tamkhulu, I know that you do not want to talk about this but I feel I have the right to know why my mother left. Please tell me", I said and they looked at each other.

Mrs Mlandu: "Tata?", she said while still looking at her husband.

Mr Mlandu: "Ey, my child you are right. You do have a right to know before you hear it from someone else. What is your clan name?", he asked.

Ntombi: "MamTshawe", I said with pride.

Mr Mlandu: "Well your grandmother is also MamTshawe. That is why we forbade the relationship between your mother and father. That is why we could never accept his lobola and that is why your mother chose to run away from home". His words left me speechless.

Mrs Mlandu: "According to our culture that means I'm your father's relative", she said softly.

Ntmbi: "I know what it means, Makhulu. So it means that I'm a product of shame?", I said in a whisper.

Mr Mlandu: "You have nothing to do with the choices your parents made. All of this is because of them and them only. You will not apologize for being born when you were not even given a choice.", he said trying to make me feel better but that did not help much.

Mrs Mladu: "All that we need to do is have a ceremony where we ask the ancestors to forgive what has happened and ask them to not block all good things in your life. Everything will be forgiven, my baby. We have forgiven your mother because we understand that love sometimes make you lose all reasoning.", she said.

Ntombi: "It explains why Malume Bandile keeps saying that he had a black goat or sheep ready for me. He is referring to this"

Mr Mlandu: "I have told him numerous times that he needs to mind the business of his own

house."

Ntombi: "I also heard something about Mama's body being taken from Queenstown to here. She never said she wishes to be buried here while she was sick"

Mrs Mlandu: "Even if she did, she would not have discussed it with a child, Ntombi. If she did discuss it with your father, he would have said nothing about it because he knew he would have no decisions as far as Nobandla is concerned"

Ntombi: "But they were legally married. Mama's ID said Nobandla Poti and not Mlandu"

Mr Mlandu: "To us culture is important, my child. They might have done things the western ways but if they skipped the traditional ways then to us they were never married. Your father never sent his family here to build a relationship with us."

Ntombi: "But he does not have extended family either, well not many anyway"

Mrs Mlandu: "I'm sure he took your mother to his family, they asked questions and discovered they should not be married.

Perhaps your father left his home like your mother did too.

The only person who can give us answers is your father and I'm glad you are here. Now you can show us where you grew up"

Ntombi: "I don't want to see that woman", I said in a sad whisper.

Mrs Mlandu: "That witch will not dare touch you while I'm there. I will show her what I'm made of"

Mr Mlandu: "We won't go there to fight. I want us to put this thing to rest. I do not want to spend my last years fighting Mziwakhe when I wasted many years angry at him already. I

want peace. I want peace for us, my wife and for you, my grandchild. I do not want to fight with your father but there are certain matters that need to be discussed, matters that should be dealt with by those who were there when it all started. Like your grandmother said, you need to have a ceremony done. I don't want any more misfortunes following you because it seems like your life was filled with that. I don't want your daughters to end up running from home too someday, Ntombi. Do you hear me?"

Ntombi: "Yes, Tamkhulu. I hear you", I nodded.

Mrs Mlandu: "But I still want to sit with that Nomvula, look her straight in the eyes while talking to her. I want to know what kind of woman who has children of her own would treat a baby who had at the time just lost her mother like trash in her father's house. I want to look into Mziwakhe's eyes and ask him if he really, really did not realize that his witch is abusing his daughter for years"

Mr Mlandu: "You will not go there to cause trouble."

Mrs Mlandu: "No, Tata. I respect

you, my husband but this I have to do. I want them to feel shame for what they did to my daughter's only baby. If they did not want her they could have brought her here. Mziwakhe knows where he took Nobandla and if Nobandla's child was a burden to his new marriage, he should have brought Ntombi here. She's not even thirty yet she can write a book about the pain she endured and all that because some woman failed to love her husband's child? No, Tata please don't expect me to be quiet about this. This here", she said while

pointing at me. "She is our only link to Nobandla, I see her and I see our child and it pains e to know that I could not protect Nobandla's baby.", she said while crying and walked out. I stood to go after her but Tamkhulu stopped me.

Mr Mland: "When she is like this, she prefers to be alone. My baby. She will now go work in her garden until she calms down. We will fix it all. Let this not be your burden. For once throw the burden at us, so we can carry them for you. You will see, in a few months, you will feel new. You won't even know the

new Ntombi. Zimtle suggested that you continue with your visits to the doctor to talk and she will pay for it. Let this clan name issue not even be a burden on you. We will fix it, we owe you a lot."

Ntombi: "You don't owe me anything, Tamkhulu. I just ask th...that you never stop loving me please. I don't want to lose more people that I love", I said before breaking down in tears.

Mr Mlandu: "Never! You see how your grandmother is reacting? It is because she loves you. The thought of you enduring pain from your father's wife and then that

uncultured boy you were involved with breaks us because we know it would never have happened had we been in your life. We love you and it's a love no evil will be able to break.

I hugged him and he kissed my cheek. I love them. Who does not love their grandparents? I realized it is no use going of about what could and might have happened. We are here now. I still need to figure out exactly how I feel about the clan name issue. I'm not even going to judge my mother because she had her reasons. My grandfather was

right when he said it is non of my business but it is business that affect me. It explains why Malume Bandile seem off around me. I know he loves me but I think he fears what my presence in his family's house might do since my existence is wrong.

Perhaps he fears the ancestors will punish them. I don't know why he is bothering himself with Tshawe business when he is Myirha. I will do this ceremony that will show the entire village that I'm a black sheep in the family. I'm not looking forward to seeing Nomvula but she had

better not test me, I've got back up now.

I want to hear what my father has to say too. It would hurt me to hear that he suspected I'm being mistreated yet did nothing about it. I went to the garden where Makhulu is busy plucking out grass that did not belong in her garden. I bowed and helped her. We did not speak the entire time and it felt good. We did not fill our space with empty, meaningless words. We just enjoyed each others company in silence. I don't know if I will ever tell them the evil I did against

Liyema, but I'm sure that they love me and want to protect me with every strength they have left. I don't know how my father will receive us or how he will react when they want to take my mother's remains but I'm looking forward to seeing him. It is time I humbled myself before my father and ask for forgiveness. That does not just apply to my earthly father but also my heavenly Father as well. I have done things that have gone against His teachings. I have hurt Liyema, one of His children. I need to ask for forgiveness and

start doing right by both my fathers. I feel like I'm not just Mziwakhe Poti's long lost daughter but also God's long lost daughter. After the grace and mercies that have been showered upon my life, it is time I go home and fix things. It will not be easy but it is a journey worth going on. I will start going to church with my grandparents and live a righteous life. I will not stay at my father's house. After they have dealt with their issues, I will come back to live here. There is peace here. Nomvula might ask for forgiveness and all but she will

never love me. Here I'm loved, I know it and I feel it. I'm home. At least I now have an ID, all I need is my certificate and I will go look for a job and try to go back to school part time. I will make my grandparents proud and myself too. Nothing is standing in my way of making my dreams come true now.

TWENTY THREE
NTOMBI

The day to go to my father's house has come. After a lot of planning from my grandparents and uncle they feel they are finally ready to co confront my father. They say that they go in peace, but I know such an issue is bound to raise old wounds and emotions, especially from my grandmother. I feel she has not forgiven my father for taking her only daughter though my mother was not forced. I do not know how I feel about going home yet. It has been years since I have gone. I don't even know if the people I left behind are still alive. My

father might tell me to return to where I'm from and if that is the case I at least have a real home to go to and not go to Bonga's. That satan has not tried to contact me again. My phone never rings but then again who would call me? Mrs B calls but she is the only one. A part of me hopes Liyema would call, even if it is just to shout at me and tell me how much he hates me. Me and Makhulu sat at the back of Malume Bandile's bakkie. He put a sponge and blanket for us to be comfortable while he and Tamkhulu sat in front. Makhulu

make plenty of food for the road for a trip that might take about two hours. I'm not complaining though because I enjoy the food, so much so that I'm the only one stuffing her face since we left home. I guess they are two nervous to eat or they are preparing themselves mentally for what is to come. I intend on taking things as they come. We might be welcomed or chased away and I'm prepared for both those options. I'd get a glimpse of Makhulu looking at me with and when I look at her attentively she looks out of the

window. I'm sure she is saying I'm being selfish for eating so much of the food. I finished the chicken thigh I'm holding in my hand and closed the container with the food in it. I don't want her to think I'm greedy.

Tamkhulu is diabetic so I'm sure most of the food is for him. The two of us sat in silence listening to the radio on my phone. We arrived in Queenstown after about two hours. My nerves are starting to sink in. I guess I was hoping the trip would be longer than this. Tamkhulu opened the little window between the front

and back of the bakkie to talk me to me. He asked if I remember the place and if I will be able to direct them to my father's house? I wish they had a GPS in the car like Liyema's car did. That thing makes life on the road easier. Malume knows the area well because he travels a lot. He still can not believe that his sister was so close by all those years ago. I'm not confident enough to direct them but then I saw a shop that I used to sit at when I was trying to get away from Nomvula's rage. It still had that big pebbles like rock in irony

of it. Everything became familiar after seeing the old shop that seems to still be in business. I wonder if it is still owned by the same person? I directed Malume as best as I can until we parked in front of the house I used to call home. Well it stopped feeling like home after my mother died. The house looks different, it's much bigger than the last time I saw it and beautiful too. It made me wonder if my father and my family still live here. There is no way my father could build such a big house.

I felt my grandmother's warm hand touch my leg. I looked up and the three of them already stood outside the vehicle waiting for me. I looked at the house once again and took a deep breath. I fell sick. Malume helped me get off the bakkie and Tamkhulu closed the cap. Makhulu sensed my nervousness and brushed my back gently. I'm not ready for this. I feel as though I'm going to vomit as soon as I step into the people's beautiful house, and those people might not even be my family. The men walked in first while Makhulu and I

followed behind. She's holding me tightly and I'm grateful for the support because I'm feeling somewhat light headed.

Tamkhulu knocked loudly much to the irritation of the people inside I'm sure. "I'm coming, if you break my door with your ill mannered knocking, you'll pay for it", said a voice from inside. It's Nomvula. I would know that voice from anywhere. Memories flooded my mind, and they were not great ones. I could feel myself having difficulty to breath. I've read up on panic attacks in some magazines, and I'm sure I'm

having one. Mkhahulu told me to breathe and gave me water. She asked me to not show the devil that it still has control over me. Is Nomvula this devil she spoke of? I managed to calm down just in time because Nomvula showed her face soon after. She scanned each face of the people in front of her and I could see that she is confused until her eyes fell on my face. She closed the door in our faces and ordered us to leave her premises before she calls the police. Makhulu dared her to call the police saying she had been in prison during the apartheid, so

she does not fear prison cells. I don't think prisons are the same now as they were then. Perhaps fellow inmates sang struggle songs with you back then to keep up your spirit but I'm sure not fellow inmates sing while they beat you up to crush your spirit. I do not want my family in jail because of that woman.

Tamkhulu suggested that we go wait in the car for my father to come home because it seems as though Nomvula is alone at home. We went to our vehicle and waited for a man that might come home soon or might never come because

for all we know my father could have died long ago.

Mrs Mlandu: "I have never seen such a rude person in my life. To close the door in an elder's face like that?", she said and clapped her hands once.

Mr Mlandu: "Let us wait for Mziwakhe to come home. He will not chase his own child away.", he said calmly. I wish we were all as calm as my grandpa, the world would not be so violent.

Bandile: "He stole my sister from her home, so anything is possible. He did not even try to look for his

child or we would have seen them on those long lost family members TV shows. It is not difficult to find people these days."

Mr Mlandu: "Was it easy for us to find Nobandla? Why didn't you ever talk about these TV shows when we were looking for your sister?", he asked while looking at Malume.

Mrs Mlandu: "Bandile is just saying, Tata. Let us not fight amongst ourselves now. I'm sure the devil is looking at us through the window and we must not look like we are frightened because we are not", she said while looking at

all the front windows of the house.

Bandile: "What if she really calls the police?"

Mr Mlandu: "And say what to them? That a child has come to her father's house? Since when is that a crime?", he said still calm. I think I'm a Tamkhulu's girl for sure. He is quiet but always has the right answers.

Mrs Mlandu: "Let her call the police, I dare her. I would like to know what the police will say when they hear that she abused my grandchild for years", she shouted. My grandmother is

feisty. No wonder she was in and out of prison because I'm sure she gave the apartheid officials hell. I would love to hear more of those stories.

We stood outside for an hour and nothing happened. No police showed up and neither did my father. Two children in school uniform approached us. The girl just passed us but the boy stood and greeted with respect. It is Lwazi and Nolwazi, my father's children with Nomvula. Nolwazi gave us a dirty look and called her brother into the yard but Lwazi asked why we were outside and

not inside. Tamkhulu told him that we are waiting for the man of the house. Nomvula opened the door to let Nolwazi in and called her son in too but he did not even look back. He looks so much like my father now that he's grown. He kept on looking at me with eyes filled with question.

Lwazi: "Sisi?", he said when he finally recognized me.

Ntombi: "Hello, Lwa", I said with a smile.

Lwazi: "Where have you been?
Tata has been worried sick about

you, I was too", he came closer and hugged me.

Ntombi: "It's a long story, Lwa", I said softly.

Lwazi: "Let me take you to Tata. He is in the field with his cows."

Ntombi: "He has cows now?"

Lwazi: "So much has changed here at home since you left. Elders, I can show you where my father is."

Bandile: "Can we go by car?"

Lwazi: "Yes, Sir", he nodded quickly.

Nomvula: "Het, Lwazi! Come into this house right now, you swine!", she shouted from the door.

Lwazi: "Let us go.", he said while looking at Tamkhulu.

Lwazi got in the front seat with the men. How he and Tamkhulu fit in one chair was beyond me. I guess being slender comes in handy sometimes. I could see Lwazi wave his thin long arm left and right while directing Malume. The car came to a standstill when we reached an open field filled with cows. These could not possibly be my father's cows. Did they win the lottery? Malume came to open the back for me and Makhulu to get out. Lwazi went to an old man, shook his hand in greeting

and pointed at us with a smile. The man looked at us and walked closer. I can not believe that it's my father. The years have caught up with him. His back also look like it has a slight bend to it. His head now look bigger because he has gotten thin. My father was never a good looking man, but he was not like this. His skin looks darker too. Could me being away have caused him so much stress that he aged before his time? He looks like he is the same age as my grandfather. He walked closer and I could see that he recognized each person who stood

in front of him. He ran to me and gave me a tight hug. I wrapped my arms around his thin waist and sobbed like a little child. I don't know what made me cry so much. Is it the fact that I had missed him? Is it the overwhelming welcome from him? Or is it the fact that I could feel my father's ribs while I hug him? Perhaps it's for all those reasons. Lwazi also wrapped his arms around m. the three of us just stood like that for the longest while. I did not have a relationship with the twins because Nomvula always treated

them better than me. It is difficult to build a relationship with your siblings when you are the only one being singled out for all the bad treatments. There was a time when I resented them too but as I grew older, I realized that they did not know better and did not deserve my hatred. I do remember a day when it was raining heavily outside though and Nomvula made me sleep in the dog house again like she did many times before. I remember the young Lwazi coming to the dog house with a big piece of dry bread and

a blanket. He did not say much. He just gave the items to me and disappeared into the house again. I guess he has always been the opposite of his mother but it seems Nolwazi might take after her judging from how she just passed elders like that instead of greeting. My father let go and looked at me while whipping away my tears. He kept on asking me what he had done for me to just decide to go like that? I told him that it was not a matter to be discussed at a field. He nodded and greeted my family. He could not look my grandparents in the eyes,

I'm assuming he feels ashamed. Malume did not shake my father's hand at all. Makhulu told him that his wife spat in our faces before she closed the door in our faces. Such exaggeration.

Tata instructed the young men who were with him when we came to the field to look after the cows. He got into his bakkie with Lwazi and we got into Malume's and drove back to his house. We arrived at the house and Nomvula had no choice but to let us in.

Tata invited us to have a seat. The house looks amazing.

Nomvula offered us tea and we all said no thank you.

Makhulu: "Do you want to kill us before we get to tell your husband that your the devil's daughter?"

Tata: "Who do you think will trust anything you give them after what you did? You spat in an old person's face and shut the door of my house in my child's face."

Nomvula: "Did Ntombi tell you that, Tata Ka Lwazi? I told you this child is a liar. She clear..."

Tata: "Hey, shut up, shut up and sit down!", he ordered. She sat down.

Tamkhulu: "We are not here to cause conflict in your house, Mziwakhe. Whatever you need to deal with, with your wife do it privately."

Tata: "I'm sorry, Faku."

The elders started to talk and I sat quietly listening to them.

Malume and Makhulu left all senses of peace when they started talking about how my father took my mother. Nomvula would look at me with a look of

pure disgust. I'd be fooling myself if I said I;m not afraid of her because I am. My heart would beat faster each time my eyes caught hers. If looks could kill, I'd have been dead and buried by now. I did not show her that she still rattles my feathers though. I pretended to be brave. There was a moment where she looked at me without blinking. I looked right at her until she looked away first. I'm faking it until I make it. If I could survive Bonga's abuse, then her death stares mean nothing.

Tata: "I hear you, Mlandu family and I take full responsibility for what happened. Nobandla was a woman who respected culture very much, but I convinced her that our love is more important"

Makhulu: "Yes we know that. Nobandla come from these two hands and if there is one thing we taught our child is how to be a cultured young woman. That is why I say you took her."

Tamkhulu: "Going on about Mziwakhe taking Nobandla or Nobandla running away on her own free will won't turn back time. The only way is forward."

Malume: "The only way forward is us taking Nobandla's remains and rebury her in the family burial site", his words left my father's eyes wide open. I'm not sure if it's because of shock or what.

Tata: "She was no longer a child in the Mlandu house, she was a wife in the Poti family. She is resting exactly where she should be"

Malume: "You even have the nerve to say she's from the Poti family when you never paid lobola. What you to were doing here was cohabiting", he shouted.

Tata: "I might not have paid lobola to the family but we made the best of the situation at the time and we got another Nyawuza family pay lobola to. Someone advised us that since they have the same clan name as her, they were good enough to..."

Malume: "So you respect culture when it suits you? When my parents told you that you could not marry their child because you and Mama have the same clan name you thought clan name relations were nonsense but when you wanted what you wanted it

was good enough. You are unbelievable!"

Nomvula: "Hey, don't you dare shout at my husband! Who the hell do you think you are. You came from your grass mat to my house only to..."

Tata: "Hey, you keep your mouth shut. This business concerns my late wife and her family. You are nothing here, so get out", he shouted at his wife. Nomvula sat and folded her arms with an attitude. "Out!", my father ordered again. She stood and walked out.

Tamkhulu: "Bandile, I suggest that you also get some air, son. If we all shout like this then nothing good will come out of this. I just want to fix things so that my child can rest in peace knowing that we have forgiven her and that there is peace between us and her husband no matter what happened. We can't wake Nobandla up from the grave and have her explain her side of the story. You and your mother assume you know what her side of the story was because you keep on saying Mzwakhe took her. Well as someone who had a talk to

Ntombi about this before she left, I know she was not forced."

Makhulu: "Talk? You have never mentioned it"

Tamkhulu: "When, my dear when all you told the child was what she was doing is a sin, she'd burn in hell for? Nobandla was always free to talk to me instead of you, just as Bandile is free to talk to you more than me. Do not act shocked. We all were at fault somehow for things turning out like this. If it was up to me not even Ntombi would be in this room but since she insisted, who am I to deny her the truth of what

happened between her mother and father. Nobandla knew marrying Mziwakhe was wrong but she did it anyway, that we can't change. What we need to look at now is a way forward", he said while looking at my uncle. Malume sat back down and kept quiet.

Tata: "I'm not willing to have my Nobandla's remains dug up. I know that she is resting in peace. Perhaps Ntombi not being home where she belongs might have disturbed her peace but our child is home now."

Makhulu: "I'm not leaving my child here with that witch you call a wife. Tell him everything Ntombi, don't leave a single detail out. Let him know just how cruel life was under his roof. Coming here and saying "our child is home" as if Nobandla would have wanted her child to live with that...that thing", she said with disgust.

Ntombi: "I don't think this is the right time to talk about it, Makhulu. You all are already so upset.", I said softly.

Tamkhulu: "More reason to talk now, my baby. Let us lay everything on the table now and

look for ways to move forward. Bringing things up bit by bit will only prolong our healing", he said while looking at me. I nodded. Makhulu asked that my father call his wife back in so it won't seem as though I'm lying and making up stories. Nomvula returned and threw herself on the chair. I swear if my grandma could, she's have her hands around Nomvula's neck by now. She's Makhulu fear nothing, she said so in herself. Tata told me to say what I wanted to say and not be afraid. I told him everything, in between sobs of

course. He was crying and so was my grandmother. This is a sensitive issue for her because she partly blames herself.

Makhulu believes had she look for my mother harder, she could have found me and raised me and spared me all the pain. That would have been great, no child deserves to know pain and trauma from a young age, but Tamkhulu was right "what ifs" will get us nowhere. Tata asked Nomvula what she has to say about everything and she denied it, I did not expect her to take ownership of her wrongdoings. I

thought Tata would take her side but instead he apologized to me for being blind to things that were happening under his roof. He said he believes me. No words could describe the feeling of hearing my father say he believes me. Hearing where and who I ran away with hurt him. No father wants to hear his teenage daughter ran away with a man to a big city only to be his punching bag. Tata asked to have a moment with just me. The family went outside. He came to sit next to me and gave me another hug.

Ntombi: "You look thinner and older, Tata", I said while looking at in.

Tata: "Hey, my child life has not always been good. Remember I worked in the mine for some time", he asked and I nodded.

"Well that had some effect on my health. I was diagnosed with chronic silicosis a few years back", his words left me speechless.

Ntombi: "What is that?", I finally managed to ask.

Tata: "It's a sort of lung disease caused by inhaling too much silica dust. It's okay because I get

treatment, I'm better than those who need an oxygen to help them breath. I have difficulty breathing and I've lost weight but I soldier on, my child. I refused to die when I have not seen you. You see now, I can die in peace.", he said with a smile.

Ntombi: "Don't say that, Tata. No one is going to die. You keep taking your medicine and you'll be fine"

Tata: "Have you seen how much you look like your mother? Well good thing too, you'd have been an ugly girl had you looked like me",

he joked trying to not focus on his sickness.

Ntombi: "Are you even suppose to look after cows, Tata. Whose cows are you taking care of? Can't they see that you are old and sick"

Tata: It's my livestock. Myself and some miners got a settlement from the mine for the silicosis. It was enough for me to build this house for you and your siblings, to buy a lot and some cows. I've left it all for you and your brother and sister. I even had a will done, so there would be no conflict between you three. I never once forgot about you, Ntombi. You are in all

my plans. I know you said you'll go back to your grandparents house but please visit often.. I will do right by them. I will honor them with the lobola they deserve for raising a great woman. I hope that you do not hate me and your mother for the choice we made. We were in love, Ntombi. I loved her from the second I saw her. We chose love, my baby and I won't pretend like I regret it. Our love gave us you, I can't regret it. I will work with your grandfather because we both want to put this to rest. I will fix it. I will give them all my cows

if need be to show just how sorry Nobandla and I am. I'll also deal with Nomvula. I really never knew, even if your grandmother believes otherwise. As a man you trust the woman to look after things at home, that includes the children, cooking and cleaning, while you go get food. I put so much trust in Nomvula with you that I did not see a need to question her care. I wish you trusted me enough to speak up."

Ntombi: "I'm not asking you to leave your wife, Tata. I just want a real apology from her. I want her to admit everything but

it seems I'll have to forgive a person that is not even sorry"

Tata: I believe you and if I leave her, it will not be because of you.

Do not worry about that. Oh I've missed you. I'm sorry I was not a present father.", he said and cried.

Ntombi: "It's fine, Tata", I said while brushing his back.

We spoke for a long while. He reminded me of all the happy moments we shared as a family that were buried deep in my memory due to the pain that overshadowed it. It feels good to be laughing with him once again.

He coughed a bit too often for my liking but it was a part of his sickness. It is sad to hear that this silicosis has no cure but I pray the treatment keeps him going for longer. I can not lose him too, not now at least. The elders spoke privately while I sat in the car with Lwazi. He told me about school and his girlfriend that is not really his girlfriend but will be soon. Nolwazi left with her mother to their relatives. I think the veil over Lwazi's eyes fell off and he saw his mother for who she really is and it seems uTata has too. Lwazi tried to

show respect for his mom for us but I feel that he lost all respect for her. I'll know the reason behind that some other time. The elders finished their meeting and Tata said he will take us to Mama's grave. I got into the car with him and Lwazi this time and could only hope Makhulu understands. We arrived at the graveyard and walked between the graves until we got to Mama's grave. Her grave had a beautiful tombstone. When I left, it still only had an old worn out wooden cross with her name on it. The tombstone had her names,

birth and death date and "Loving wife, mother, daughter and sister" written on it. To me that showed that my father somehow included her family by acknowledging that she was a daughter and sister to them. Makhulu broke down again. Tata spoke and told Mama that we are here. Tamkhulu spoke first and would occasionally wipe his eyes with his cloth. Malume Bandile said something too and so did Makhulu. They asked if I wanted to say something and all I said is "I love you, Mama". To me her death is old news compared to her

family. I've had longer to grieve for her, even though I'm still grieving. The three of them each put a stone on Mama's grave because they were not at her funeral. Tamkhulu said he felt as if a load was taken off his shoulders. He told his wife and son that Nobandla will be left to rest here. I thought they would fight but Makhulu nodded. I pray that my mother knows that she's forgiven by her family wherever she is. I hope that she knows that I don't hate her for choosing love. I hope she knows that I don't hate her for

bringing me into a love that is forbidden. I love her and if I ever was to have children, I would have told them about her. I could feel the peace my grandfather spoke about too. I brushed the smooth dark gray marble tombstone with my fingers and smiled.

Ntombi: "Rest now Manyawuza, Faku, Sigcau, Bokleni, Ndamase". All is well with us now", I said with a smile.

I then spoiled the moment by vomiting all over my own mother's tombstone. Who does that?

Makhulu gave me water to rinse

my mouth. I apologized so much because to me it looks at though I've just disrespected my late mother even if I had no control over it. Lwazi came with a 5liter bottle filled with water from the car and c poured it over the grave to clean it up. I felt like hiding myself. Tata reassured me that I have no reason to be embarrassed. Trust me to vomit on my mother's grave. I can not get any more weird than this surely. We went back to the house. Nomvula was still not there. Makhulu said she went to see her witchdoctor for the

strongest muti money could buy. I kept quiet because I do not want to gossip, not even about Nomvula. The day went well. I just wish my father was not sick. He's still too young for this health burden. It seems him and the Mlandu family made peace. It has not been an easy day, but thanks to Tamkhulu's peaceful and calm nature, things went off without anyone punching the other even though there were moments I thought Malume would hit my father. Apparently Mama and Tata did a ceremony to ask for forgiveness from the

ancestors a long time ago just after I was born, so there won't be a need for more. Good thing they did, the thought of having a black goat slaughtered for me as a sign of shame did not sound like something I looked forward to. What I don't remember, can't hurt me. So Malume Bandile can keep his black goat for another occasion because I was tired of him telling me that he already has one ready.

TWENTY FOUR

NTOMBI

It's been a month since my father and I reunited and it has been a month of bliss. He has been spoiling me rotten. As much as I appreciate the new clothes, smart phone and other materialistic goods he has gifted me with, his presence still remains the biggest gift. Going out with him and having some father-daughter time has been great. The fact that him and my grandparents have made peace is a bonus. Tata honored the Mlandu family with lobola for their daughter even though Mama died

years ago. I thought he would tell them all to go to hell because he claims that he found a family with the Nyawuza clan name and paid lobola to them since they are family to my mother's according to culture. My parents have clearly diluted our culture in order to make it work for their relationship. My grandfather accepted the lobola because he wants us to move on from the conflict and it seems like we have made a lot of progress. The only problem was my uncle who demanded money for damages. My father had to explain that I was

conceived when they were married already. Malume Bandile heard about my father's settlement money, so I assume he thought he'd take advantage. Fortunately Tamkhulu and Makhulu are not greedy people and did not see things the way their son did. My father has been asking me to come over for a weekend because since we reunited, he has been the one traveling to see me. Makhulu said no such thing will happen because Nomvula might poison me, and I have the same concerns my grandmother has. I still fear the woman and I know if she

could kill me without getting caught, she'd take the chance. Mrs B says Nomvula might be a narcissist. When she explained what a narcissist is, Bonga's personality also fit the description. Nomvula and Bonga blamed me for everything, even things that they were to blame for. Nomvula used to blame for the arguments she'd have with my father and Bonga used to blame me for how he used to abuse me. They never once took responsibility for their own actions. Mrs B advised me to solely focus on my own healing for

now. I've been going to church with my grandparents and seeing my grandmother in her church uniform made me smile because it reminded me of my mother. Well looking at Tamkhulu in his red waistcoat was a different story because it reminded me of Liyema. What I fear most is the church having a big church gathering someday, and Liyema attend as well and be forced to see me again. I"" have to come up with excuses should there be a big nationwide church conference because I would not be comfortable with being in the

same building as Liyema. I'm sure he would go to the front and tell everyone what I did to him. He is not the type to hang his dirty laundry for everyone to see but anger makes a person not act like themselves sometimes. I can already imagine the disappointment and humiliation it would bring to my grandparents. I shudder when I think about it. Tata is coming to visit again today. I need to tell him to stop spending his money on me. I'm still concerned about his health because I've read that some people have died from silicosis. I

stood in front of the mirror
jumping up and down while trying
to get a jean over my hips.

Makhulu walked into the room to
see what all the stumping is
about. I could see her reflection in
the mirror. She folded her arms
while watching me struggle. I'm
sure she will tell me to wear a
skirt or dress instead.

Makhulu: "Ntombikayise", she
said.

Ntombi: "I know, Makhulu. I'll
wear a dress", I said while taking
the jean off.

Mkahulu: "Well that was not what I was going to say but yes, wear something else. I was actually going to ask if this was one of the jeans your father bought two weeks ago?", she said while looking at the tag of the jean.

Ntombi: "I'm fat, Makhulu. You can say it. Between all of your warm home cooked meals and the take aways Tata buys when he visits, how can a girl not get fat? I did not stand a change", I said while looking for a dress.

Makhulu: "Well you are gaining at a rapid rate", her words kind of made me sad.

Ntombi: "I'll lose weight. Liye...a friend of mine has shown me how to eat well and I'll do home exercises too. I'm sure I'll stop feeling so tired too", she kept quiet and I'm glad because I don't like hearing that I'm fat.

Makhulu: "Ntombi", she said softly and sat down on my single bed.

Ntombi: "Makhulu?", I looked at her. She patted the spot beside

her on the bed. I knew she wants me to sit next to her and I did.

Makhulu: "This is not easy for me but as the only other woman in the house, I have no choice but to talk to you about this. Did you and that boy sleep together", she asked. I did not know how to answer.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry for letting you down, Makhulu. I know..."

Makhulu: "No, my baby please I did not mean it like that. Well you've been with this boy for years without anyone advising you, so am I correct in assuming

that you have slept with him", she said gently. The room felt so small and not to mention hot.

Ntombi: "Correct, Makhulu", I said in an embarrassed whisper.

Makhulu: "Okay...did you go for family planning and used a condom", she asked. I don't know why we are having the birds and the bees conversation.

Ntombi: "Yes, Makhulu", I lied. Well it was not a complete lie because Bonga and I used protection.

Makhulu: "Well I think something happened then that broke the

barriers of the protection you were using because I suspect that you might be pregnant.", she said while looking at my belly.

Ntombi: "So a person can't just gain weight anymore, Makhulu?", I asked sounding defensive.

Makhulu: "Judging by how quickly you covered yourself, it tells me that there might be a possibility. Is there?"

Ntombi: "No, Makhulu", I mumbled.

Makhulu: "Okay but should there be anything you want to tell me,

I'm here.", she said before walking out of my room.

I have been feeling a bit strange lately but I know I'm not pregnant. Liyema and I did the test and we both saw that it was negative. It's all the hearty meals that is causing this. I just need to cut down on the meat and dumplings and eat salads. I've never been skinny, so I'll obviously gain weight quicker than a slender person. I will ask the boys who play soccer at the field if I can join them when they gym. I took the dress off and stood in my underwear in front of the mirror.

I looked at my belly and noticed that my abdominal area does look a bit swollen, but I'm sure it is UTI. I have this bad habit of holding in urine so I'm sure my bladder is under pressure. My breasts were feeling a bit sore but only a bit. I'm sure it's because my period is on its way. My body has not been the same since I took those hormonal drugs for the surrogacy so I'm sure I'm suffering the side effects.

Knowing how much Liyema values quality, I'm sure he took the best home pregnancy test so I trust and believe the results the test

gave us were accurate. It has to be accurate. I heard my dad's voice and quickly got dress again. I made my way to the lounge where he was sitting with my grandfather. I greeted and the first thing he said was I'm gaining more weight and joked that it's because I'm happy. I thought about it and that could also be a reason. I told Tata I'm ready to go and he was ready.

Tamkhulu told us to have fun but Makhulu had to be difficult.

Makhulu: "Please change your shoes. I have seen you slip and almost fall while wearing those

twice. They are too slippery and we don't want to risk you falling. Who knows what you might break?", she said while looking at me.

Tamkhulu: "Ntombi is still young and fresh. If she falls, the worst that could happen is a bruised knee and dirt on her pretty dress", he joked and the men laughed.

Makhulu: "Please, my baby", she pleaded while still looking at me. I have no desire to argue with her, I really do not so I did as asked. I wore sandals that had a

proper rubber sole. I asked if she's happy with them and she said yes and smiled. Tata always seemed excited about our dates and I'm usually the same but not today. After my talk with Makhulu, my mind is flooded with thoughts. I had to be sure before I go crazy. Tata asked what I want to do for the day. I don't really have a lot of options to choose from. I asked if we could go to a pharmacy so I can buy headache tablets. He drove to the local pharmacy and I looked at him while driving. I could just be me but I think he is

looking much better, healthier in a way. Perhaps it's my mind tricking me into seeing what I want. His health still concerns me and the fact that he has to drive all the way from Queenstown to see me worries me.

Ntombi: "Tata, are you sure you are allowed to drive?"

Tata: "For the millionth time yes", he said and laughed.

Ntombi: "How are things at home?"

Tata: "I don't want to bother you with things that happen there. I'm actually glad you chose

to live with your grandparents instead even if I want all my children under my roof."

Ntombi: "Nomvula giving you a hard time?", I thought he would scold at me for calling his wife by name and not saying Ma or something.

Tata: "I can handle her, my girl. She thinks that I will feel intimidated by her but she is wrong. I hate that she has this child...uhm...Nolwazi under her influence. That child is losing respect for me because she listens to her mother. At least Lwazi still respects me."

Ntombi: "If you are not happy with your marriage the why don't you leave?"

Tata: "So she could get half of everything?"

Ntombi: "She's your wife, Tata whether you like it or not. So you'd rather remain with her than lose some of your money?"

Tata: "That money is for my children. It's for you three. We are more like housemates anyway. I no longer sleep in that bedroom", he said and looks like he regrets over sharing. "When you get married one day, make sure

you know the person you get married to, my child. That is all I" say about my marriage for now. I'll fix it.

Ntombi: "Lwazi si a nice boy. So warm and affectionate", we both smiled.

Tata: "He is and so is Nolwazi, she has just been poisoned by her mother. What is different between them is that Lwazi is observant. He needs not be told what to look out for, he silently sits and observe and see things as they are. Nolwazi is one who believes things she is told by other and mostly they feed her

false information but they are both good kids, they take after their big sister", his words left a big smile on my face.

We arrived at the pharmacy and went our different ways. Tata wanted to come with me but I told him it's for girly matters. African men usually shy away from "girly matter". I don't even know if they know what that means or what girly things involve but they don't like being a part of such. He went to get some ointment for Lwazi's knee that got injured while playing rugby at school. I asked for the

aisle with the pregnancy tests and went to it. I looked around like a person whose intentions are to steal. I looked at all the options in front of me while I bit my nails. I don't usually bite my nails but I'm a nervous wreck. I saw one that looked identical to the one Liyema bought. I took it and another one from a different brand. I looked around to see if my father is at the till points but saw him looking at other stuff. I almost ran to the counter to pay. I put the plastic with the tests in my handbag and waited for my father by the exit. He finished

with his purchase and we went to the car. I felt ill before our day even begun. Poor Tata understood and took me home. He stayed at the house for hours and even helped Tamkhulu with some chores outside. Makhulu and I cooked lunch for the family. I wish Mama was here to see how welcomed and comfortable her husband is at her parents house. The mood between Makhulu and I was a bit awkward. I think I was trying hard to act mad like I'm mad at her for assuming that I'm pregnant. The day went by quickly and it was night before

we knew it. I'm worried about the fact that my sick father returning to a house where love no longer exists between him and his wife and that the children are forced to choose sides. I'm trying my best to not take on anyone's problems because Mrs B advised it but how could I not when it's father who is involved and he is not well enough to take on stress. Makhulu made late night tea for the two of us. Her husband worked way to much during the day, so he went to bed early. They usually go to bed round about the same time but Makhulu looked like

she has no intentions of joining her husband any time soon. I think she wants me to confess to being pregnant but I can't because I'm not. I have not taken the tests yet, there was no time to. We sat on the couch watching a comedy show but neither of us are laughing. I don't know where I found the courage to tell her about my home pregnancy test purchase, but I did. I thought she would be upset because I denied any possibility of me being pregnant when she spoke about it. I asked if I could take the tests now and she said

yes. A part of me feels like she is rectifying the mistakes she made with my mother through me. She revealed that she and my mother did not have a close relationship. Mama preferred talking to her father. I think Makhulu does not want that with me and that is why she is keeping so calm and being supportive. Well whatever her reasons may be, I'm grateful. I can't imagine how horrible being alone would have been when I'm feeling so afraid. This is no normal situation.

I disappeared into the bathroom and peed on both sticks without

having read the instructions because I've done it before. I walked with them in hand to my bedroom where Makhulu is waiting. She stood from the bed as soon as I walked in and asked what the results are. I had to explain to her that we need to wait for about 5 minutes first. The two of us sat on the bed waiting to see what these plastic sticks have to say. My hands are shaking, but Mkhahulu held them steady in hers. She kept on saying that she will not be disappointed should it be positive, that she and Tamkhulu would help me raise

the baby. I wish it was that simple, but It is not. The phone beeped and I told her that it's time to check what the tests say. She took them out of her gown's pocket and gave them to me. I could not find it in me to look at them. Makhulu looked at the pregnancy tests and looked at me.

Makhulu: "The box said if it's two stripes, it is positive. Both have two stripes, my baby", her word left me feeling light headed.

Ntombi: "Liyema and I saw the first test with our own eyes, Makhulu and it was negative", I

said while looking at the tests hoping that Makhulu had problems with her vision for a second.

Makhulu: "So his boy's name is Liyema? Did you two want the child? How were you going to bring a child into the world when he was beating you, Ntombi?", she asked. I never told them Bonga's name, only what he had done to me.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry, Makhulu", I said softly and sobbed. She put her arms around me.

Makhulu: "I'm not even angry at you. We will be here all the way until your little one is born and we will raise the baby together. We can tell your grandfather anytime you feel ready or if you want I can tell him myself. We love you, Ntombikayise. I'm sure your father will also help. After hearing what that boy did to you, I don't want him anywhere near you. Did you say that when you took a test in his presence it was negative?", she asked.

Ntombi: "Yes, Makhulu", I nodded.

Makhulu: "Okay that means he does not know you are pregnant. I

don't think you should let him know. The last thing a child needs is a toxic father. I know that what I'm saying is not right but I can't imagine that boy you described being in you and your baby's life with all his toxicity"

Ntombi: "You don't understand, Makhulu. It is much more complicated than that", I said while holding on to her more tightly.

Makhulu: "Complicated how?"

Ntombi: "I will lose the child soon anyway. I was so sure it did not work.", I said softly. She asked

what I meant by lose the child. I explained the issue of my womb.

Makhulu: "Do you know that long ago a pregnant woman had her own special diet? It was rich in nutrients. I have all my grandmother's recipes. She had twelve children, all healthy. The woman in my family and your grandfather's have never struggled to give birth to healthy babies. You come from a long line of strong, healthy and fertile women. I will make sure you eat right, we will pray and we will take you to those expensive

doctors, even if Tata has to sell a few cows to do so."

Ntombi: "Do you want to be divorced?", we both laughed while crying.

Makhulu: "Have you not realized how you've got him wrapped around your finger? Can you imagine the effect a great grandchild would do?"

Ntombi: "It's still not as simple as that, Makhulu. There is just so much about the child's father that you need to know."

Makhulu: "Let us talk when we have processed this. I've

processed it and I;m happy. I don't want to lie to you. This will be my first great grandchild. How many women do you know who can say they met their great grandchild?"

Ntombi: "Makhulu, this child is not my child. It's not your great grandchild either.", she looked at me like I've lost all senses.

Makhulu: "Get some sleep. I had easy pregnancies but I heard some women would get confused during pregnancy. That is your child, it is inside of you. I will remind you about this conversation and we will laugh and

how silly pregnancy is making you already. I love you. Goodnight, I hope the two of you will sleep well.", she said with a smile on her face.

Ntombi: "Makhulu, please don't get attached to a baby that will not stay with us."

Makhulu: "Please sleep Ntombi. We will talk tomorrow. You will make sense tomorrow because now you are not. I think its the shock of the news. Get rest."

She did not give me a chance to explain but I do not blame her. I'm pregnant with a child that is

not mine to keep. How do I explain to old people that I'm pregnant but the child will be taken from us as soon as its born. Even Tata will not understand this. How can I stop them from bonding with the child to save them heartbreak? Why was Liyema's test negative? Was it expired? Do they even expire? How do I know that it's not mine that have expired? This is a small place do it might be possible. If I'm this fat now, how will I look in a few more weeks? Why do I even bother with such thoughts when I might miscarry in a few weeks?

I have gotten myself into a deep mess and I do not know how to fix it. Why did I not tell Bonga to go to hell when he told me to do this, call Mrs B and ask that she help me come here? Makhulu thinks Liyema is Bonga, if only she knew how different the two are. Liyema found out that I conned him but never even swore at me. Bonga hit me for trying to love him. They could not be the same even if they tried. I'm not sure what Makhulu's maternity diet involves but I trust she will not feed me poison that will put my...Liyema's baby at risk. I'm

not sure how my grandfather will feel about selling some of his cows to private doctors but he does not have to. I'll go to state health care centers.

I took my new phone, hide my caller details and dialed Liyema's number. I memorized it for some odd reason. The phone rang and I could hear my heart beat. I knew he would answer private calls because he is a business owner but I was not sure if he would answer so late at night. "Hello", he said in a deep sleepy voice. I have woken him up. He kept saying Hello until he ended the

call. I don't know what happened. My tongue felt stiff and unable to move in order to speak. I'm glad I was mute. What would I have told him? "Hey, Liyema it's me Ntombi. The girl who tried to con you and oh by the way I'm pregnant, you can come take your baby in a few months?". There will not even be a baby anyway. I love Makhulu but doctors are good and if they say I should not get pregnant due to the bruise in my womb then they were not fooling around. I have allowed an innocent child to be put in my rotten womb that would not be

suitable for him to grow. If doctor's could not fix me, my grandma who is not even a traditional healer stands no chance. I'm glad I did not utter a word when I called Liyema because I would have made him look forward to a baby that will never be. He believes that the surrogacy failed so when I lose the baby, he won't even know. I've put him through so much already. I owe it to him to spare him the pain of losing his unborn child before even meeting him. I won't even tell my grandmother what I meant when I said it's

not my baby because there won't be a baby a few days, weeks or months. I'll agree with her when she tells me about all the things I said while "confused". She knows my womb is not strong enough to carry a child but she does not need to know how the child was conceived and how he would never have known them should he have been born. I'm pregnant with a child that is biologically mine, but is not mine lawfully. A child that stands no chance because of my condition. I wish Makhulu understood when I told her it's complicated. I wonder

if I will ever have my life in order?

TWENTY FIVE

LIYEMA

There is nothing I hate more than receiving calls late at night from a private number only for that person to keep quiet. I always answer calls because they could be business related but I think the person who has been calling is either bored or they like the sound of my voice. I had no choice but to be rude the last

time by telling the mystery caller that I'm not their fool. It seems that they got the message because I have not received a call since. Vusi claims that I have a stalker but I'm way too boring to have a stalker. It has been a decent couple of weeks. I've gone back to church and I've felt my anger go down a bit. Wayne has been suffering public scrutiny for his cheating ways. I don't think people realize the pain cheating causes to the one they are in a relationship with. I have no problem with the LGBTI community, but I cringe whenever

I think about what Wayne did to his wife. Why did he not just leave her, come out as gay and live his life? Now the wife is suffering the humiliation as much as he is and not to mention the children. Sometimes parents break their own children with their actions. I've been trying to find this "De Bongz" character but I was unsuccessful. I'm sure the rat made sure to hide in the deepest, darkest hole after what he did. Perhaps he is with his girlfriend Ntombi wherever he is playing Bonnie and Clyde and destroying yet another person's life. I

suspect that my mother has gotten more attached to Ntombi than I realized. When I told her about the calls, she said maybe it's Ntombi trying to apologize but is scared. I do not give a damn about Ntombi nor her apologies. I've moved on from the silly crush I had on her as well. I should actually thank this De Bongz guy because had he not ratted on Ntombi, I might have asked her out on a date. She seemed like a woman I would have liked to get to know better. I have not had that feeling since I left Zingi. Something about me

attracts these toxic women. Or is it me who is attracted to them? I've been drowning myself in my work lately and it has been paying off. More clients have signed with us and we have a new program to the company. Vusi and I have decided to take one or two students from a TVET college to do their experiential training with us. I had to convince my partner a bit because he had concerns about the company not being able to pay the students for the 18 months they will be with us. Fortunately we do not have to worry about that because the

college will be responsible for paying their stipends, all that we need to do is get them a mentors from our staff who will give them the on-the-job training that they need and also make sure that they have proper resources to do their work. Everyone who knows me, knows that youth development is close to my heart, so when the college people came to us, I did not think twice before saying yes. I've never studied at a TVET college but I've heard that it is more difficult for them to find work than it is to university students, so to me

helping them made more sense. Vusi agreed to it on condition that I handle everything because he does not have time to "hold no child's hand" because he has better things to do. I don't know if I will be able to pull it off but I'm up for the challenge and I've selected a great team from our employees to be hands on.

Today we are having a meeting with the student development team from the college. They had no problem with coming to our offices and we made sure to prepare well for them. I want them to see that their students

will learn plenty with us and perhaps even enjoy their time here. Vusi has gone with his assistant to see a client. I know its his way of not wanting to be a part of this meeting. People often ask why I partnered with him because he is "irresponsible" but they do not know him as well as I do. They know what he wants them to know and so far he has only revealed his joker side to most. When it comes to business he is a force to be reckoned with and our personalities go well together. We fight like all business partners and best friend

do but he is my boy and I would not have gotten into business with anyone else but him..

My team and I sat in the boardroom waiting for our visitors to arrive. I looked around at the four young people sitting around the boardroom table with me and feel proud. Some of them grew in business so quickly. They are ready to show the next generation of professionals how it is done. I thought they would tell me that they were not ready for the responsibility of training students, yet here they are, ready for it. I'm thank God for

enabling myself and Vusi the ability to give people jobs. They can put food on their tables because of us and nothing warms my heart more. I pray that we grow and be able to give the TVET students permanent employment too once their training is done. I'm sure they will excel here. Our receptionist walked in saying the people from the college have arrived already. I told her to let them through. My team and I looked at each other with bright smiles on our faces. I stood to welcome our future partners. A gentleman

walked in and I shook his hand and introduced myself and my team. He said his colleague is on her way, she forgot something in the car and had to go back for it. I had no problem with that, a few minutes of my time will not be a problem. The team offered him refreshments while waiting. His colleague finally walked trying to catch her breath, she has clearly been running. I stood to go greet her, her weave was covering her face. She fixed her hair and got it out of her face and I wish she had not. Zingisa stood in front of me looking

shocked. Mr Tom stood and introduced her. I had to be polite, so I extended my hand to greet her. Zingisa has always loved beauty enhancers but she looks different. The weave she had on her head almost touched her behind. Her skin looks much paler, could she have bleached her skin? I know it's a trend lately. I'm not an expert on make up but I'm sure she went overboard a bit. She looks like a doll. I asked that we get to the business of the day because I had other appointments. The meeting went well and was productive. I'm glad

she was able to be professional. We decided to take three students. Two Marketing students since we are a media and advertising company, they will get heaps of experience. We also took a Management Assistant one, she will be working closely with our receptionist and our office Administration staff, I'm sure they will also get a lot of experience. Mr Tom asked if Zingisa and I are related because of the surname. I was hoping no one would ask because now we will be forced to go back and speak about a time I would rather

forget. I told them that we used to be married. I could see no one expected that answer because one would never tell that I shared a bed with this woman. The meeting came to an end and I went to my office right away. Someone knocked and I told them to come in. Zingisa walked in with her very high heels, parading her way to my desk. She asked if she could sit and all of me wanted to tell her that I do not want more of her on my office furniture but that would have sounded petty and immature, so I let her sit. I swear this woman had some kind

of plastic surgery done. She made small talk and I told her to cut the crap and get to the point. It's rude but I don't have time for this.

Zingi: "Look, I'm here because I wanted you to know that I did not know that this is your company. When I saw Mr L. Elephant on the company file Mr Tom has, I did not think it could be you. I mean what are the odds?", she said with a smile.

Liyema: "I don't know what the odds are but they seems to be against me. Okay, I believe you.

Can I go back to work now?", I said sarcastically.

Zingi: "Liyema please, we will be working together. Mr Tom's work as far as this project is concern ended when you agreed to accommodate our students.

Everything that involves these students are my responsibility, so when you have questions about them you will have to go through me.", she said almost pleading.

Liyema: "Like Mr Tom I will not personally be involved with the students. I have people who will be hands on with them and they will be the ones to keep in touch

with you, only if need be will they come to me. Was your mind even present in the meeting because we discussed this?"

Zingi: "Stop trying to punish me. How many times must I say sorry?"

Liyema: "Oh shit", I said while rubbing my face with my hands. "Zingisa, this has nothing to do with us. I'm a CEO, I hate to put it like this but I really have much better things to do than train these students. I have a team I have delegated this to, much like Mr Tom did with you. I'm sorry to tell you this but it

has nothing to do with you. Do I want to work with you? Heck No! But that honestly this is about me being one of the people in charge of bringing in business and not train students. My team is great, you'll work well with them.", I said trying not to sound as annoyed as I feel.

Zingi: "So I have to call your team of mentors when I want to talk about the project, and not you?"

Liyema: "You will call my team should any problems or any issues related to them and their work comes up. In matters concerning

the project as a whole, myself and Mr Tom will deal with it. Just as discussed in the meeting ten minutes ago"

Zingi: "Don't make me feel dumb."

Liyema: "I give up. I need to get back to work. Can you please excuse me."

Zingi: "I know I hurt you, Liyema but you can't hate me for what I did forever.", her words made me so angry.

Liyema: "Please leave. My team will be in touch with you.", I ordered.

Zingi: "I cheated and I know now it was a mistake. How long will I have to suffer for..."

Liyema: "Don't you dare act as if you only did it once. You fucken cheated on me and I forgave you but you continued. You just did not feel like you've hurt me enough so you thought "oh let me make it worse by having sex with two men in our bed at the same time while he is out trying to make a living for us", I said with anger. This woman has some damn nerve.

Zingi: "I'm did not mea..."

Liyema: "GO!", I said while

pointing at the door. My hand is shaking because I'm angry.

Zingi: "I'm sorry for hurting you with my cheati..."

Liyema: "You know that you did way more than just cheat on me. You destroyed me"

She shed a crocodile tear or two before walking out of my office. I closed the door and punched the cushion on the couch that was in the corner of my office. The nerve of this woman. After forgiving her when I first found out about her cheating she went on. I can never forget the day I caught

her in bed with two men. I can not even describe the things I found them doing to each other. I feel sick just by remembering it. Who has an orgy in their marital bed? I sat in my office for hours. I did not take any calls and postponed my meetings. I can not meet up with people when I'm this way. The receptionist called my office to say my mother is asking to see me but I told her to lie and say I'm in a meeting. Vusi came back to the office when the day was almost over. My boy secured some new business and it is great to hear good news after

the shitty day I've had. I told him all about it and he could not believe it.

Vusi: "I can take over this student thing if you want", he said while looking at the student file.

Liyema: "And make her think she can come and control me in my own business? Heck no!" Anyway I won't even have to deal with her. I can't let her stand in the way of these kids future, man"

Vusi: "But she is standing in the way of you and your peace of mind."

Liyema: "I feel like life is testing me. First this damn surrogacy and now my ex is back in town"

Vusi: "You've overcome worse, man far worse. I'm proud of you for keeping it professional. I have a confession to make. I kinda knew she's back in town but not by seeing her. A mutual friend on Facebook liked her picture.

Curiosity made me check out her profile. She's plastic now. All she needs is a job at one of the retail shops as a mannequin because she's dolled up, literally", I don't know how this idiot manages to

make me laugh even when I don't want to but we laughed hard.

Liyema: "You're and idiot."

Vusi: "That's because I've been around you, idiot of the year for far too long", we both laughed.

Liyema: "Thanks, man", we shook hands.

Vusi: "Nha thank you, man for being a cool guy"

Liyema: "Yeah you're right, thank me", we laughed.

He gave me the details of his meeting. Our business seems to be going from strength to strength. I believed Zingisa when

she said she had no idea that I was part owner of the company because the last time she saw me I was still a lawyer at my father's firm. I studied law but I've never been in love with it. I studied it because my father made me picture this beautiful picture of us working side by side at his law firm. "Elephant and sons" he would say because he tried to get both me and my little brother to love law. Lungile only lasted a month as a law student before dropping out, at least I graduated but when I stopped seeking approval from my father

I went to pursue my own dreams. I'm a law graduate with a passion for media. I think my father never forgave me for choosing to do my thing and for divorcing his old time friend's daughter. The families know about Zingisa's infidelities because in a black family when you say the word divorce the elders of both sides of the family want to come see the married couple to find another solution that does not involve divorce. They don't know the extend of Zingisa's cheating that's why they feel I gave up too easily. Some family

members even threw the "if it was you who cheated you'd have expected Zingisa to forgive you" line. I'm well aware of my privileges as a man, especially as far as black culture goes but I would not have expected Zingisa to stay with a cheating bastard had the tables been turned. They don't know that their child had an orgy in her marital bed because I'm protecting them from the pain of knowing such. The issue is much deeper than just catching her with two men in our bed, much deeper and it is something I do not want to expose to our

families. All that I want to do is move on with my life. Had it not been for the business, I'd have moved to a different country and start a new life but I'm forced to stay. Cape Town suddenly feels small. I can't imagine running into Zingisa while doing my shopping or going for a jog. She could be my neighbor for I know. Mma will have a fit when she hears her ex daughter in law is in town. My mother is a difficult person to impress and Zingisa never got to make it to her good books. When she heard that Zingisa had cheated on me, her dislike turned

into hate. Zingisa's infidelity affected me because she was my friend for as long as I could remember. She always had the ability to grab any man's attention when she walked into a room, a true flirt and I had no problem with it. I think had our families not put so much pressure on us to "give dating" a try and getting married, she and I would still be great friends. I always advice boys at church who end up falling for their female best friends to be sure they want to turn a friendship into something romantic. The worst thing about

being involved with your best friend is the fact that should things not work out, you not only lose a lover but also a friend. Zingi has also been an attention lover, hence I'm not shocked she thinks me not working with her is about her and our issues. Do we even have issues when we have been divorced for a while now? I'm a 32 year old man who feels 60 at the moment. All the drama has made me feel exhausted.

I went home early and found my mother waiting for me.

Mma: "You look tired and weighed down. Are you eating properly,

Ndoda?", she asked while examining my upper body.

Liyema: "I thought that we passed this stage where you fuss over me.", I said and she smiled.

Mma: "Nonsense, I'll always fuss over you children. Your father asked if you can come over for dinner?"

Liyema: "I can't, Mma. I had a really long day. Between trying to come up for concepts for a difficult client, feeling nervous about Vusi's meeting, the student program we are trying to start and Zingis...", she looked at me

attentively. "You know what? I'll come tomorrow", I added hoping that she has not figured out that I was trying to say something about Zingisa.

Mma: "Has she tried to make contact again? Liyema don't give that girl a chance to hurt you again please.", she said calmly. I looked at her. She has a few wrinkles now but she is still a beautiful woman.

Liyema: "Her work will be doing a project with the company. I will have no contact with her what so ever during this time. Please stop worrying. Why are you here?"

Mma: "Liyema you underestimate how these girls operate. I bet you Zingisa has a game plan. I bet you she suggested that her boss approach your company to do business with. I'm sure she made sure she is a part of the team."

Liyema: "Mma, I'm really tired", I said and threw myself on the couch.

Mma: "Just be careful. Keep your distance. I never understood why you were friends with that girl. You two had nothing in common and she was rude from the time she was a child."

Liyema: "Well I met her because you and her parents are from the same circles and she was an interesting person back then"

Mma: "Your father's circles. She has always been superficial. I could never understand how an intelligent young boy like you were friends with a person who could barely hold a conversation"

Liyema: "Mma. Stop judging other people's children and being biased when it comes to your own. I'm not going to discuss Zingisa in my house, after a long day at work. I just want to have a cold juice, watch soccer and sleep. You still

have not told me why you're here?", I looked up at her. She looked like she was in deep thought but she snapped out of it.

Mma: "I know you said I should not buy anything for the baby because there would be no baby shower but you know I never listen so I bought some stuff."

Liyema: "Take it back and get your money"

Mma: "It's from one of those stores where they don't do any refunds. Should I keep them?"

Liyema: "Why, is your other son going to be a father soon?"

Mma: "You know, for when you try to have a baby again."

Liyema: "I won't put myself through the stress and loss of money again. So donate them to a children's home, I'm sure there are newborns who need clothing. As for me, don't expect any grandchild from me in this lifetime", I could see that my words left her hurt.

Mma: "I kind of brags to Nomasa that I'll also be a granny. You should hear her go on about her

granddaughter who was born two months ago. We are now forced to watch videos of the child sleeping”

Liyema: “Well tell them you won't be having one after all because I did not ask you to go tell your friends that there is a baby on the way”

Mma: “You are not the only one in the group without a grand baby, I am. All my friends have grand babies, they say it's amazing and I'm sure it is. Imagine having a person to spoil and not even feel guilty about it?”. I could not help

but laugh but she was dead serious.

Liyema: "Ah I'm sorry, Mma. I did not know this was so important to you. You will have a grand baby, just not now.", I tried to comfort her. My poor mother.

Mma: "I'll get over it. I'll give all those adorable little clothes that were meant for my adorable little grandson to those who need it. I will just have to deal with my friends going on about their grandchildren and showing me videos while I have nothing", she said in a sulking tone.

Liyema: "The last time I allowed you and Tata to convince me to do something was to get married. I did that and look where it ended up. I'm not your only child, grandchildren will come. Lungi loves girls a lot one is bound to get pregnant.", I said and she looked even more depressed.

Mma: "Your father pressured you. I was at fault by not stopping him but if it were up to me, that scam of a marriage would never have been. I hope she is happy with the man she cheated with. Don't you dare say that. Your brother is still a child himself, well

as per his actions. There is no way any girl would be stupid enough to fall Pregnant for him. Plus you wanted a baby and I just thought you would try again but if you say that you won't, I will not say a word about it again.", she said with anger. "Men", I thought to myself but would not dare tell her that because it would open up another can of worms especially now that Zingi is back in Cape Town.

Liyema: "Thanks, Mma"

Mma: "Try to have your nap. I will cook us dinner"

Liyema: "What happened to dinner with your husband?", I said and laughed.

Mma: "I was just trying to get you two in the same room. He sent a message, he'll be home late. I cook dinner, we eat together, we both wash the dishes and you take me home, deal?", she held her thumb up.

Liyema: "Deal", I put my thumb against her to seal the deal.

I'm in no mood for company that is why I told Mma Eunice to leave early, but I'm going to allow my mother to cook for me. I did not

realize how much she looked forward to having a grandchild. I thought she acted excited only to show me support but she was just as invested as I was. It's strange how I never heard her swear at Ntombi and give me warning about "girls like Ntombi" but she had warned me about "girls like Zingisa". To me they are both cut from the same cloth. She's right about my little brother not having a child because we would be the ones raising the child. The guy can't even wash his own dish after eating. I love him though and I

know he will get his act together. I just hope it's before he turns 30 years old. Mma's spices filled the entire house and I'm starving. She's right about her never having pressured me into marriage. I remember she always asked "Are you sure about this?" and I thought it was what I wanted so I would say yes all the time. My father should have been in sales. He is able to make a person think that what he is presenting to them is exactly what they need in their lives. He got it right with me for years. It was not the best of days but my

mother being in my kitchen cooking for us has made it feel better somehow. Perhaps there's a mommy's boy inside of me, but I appreciate her being here. I know she will go and find out what Zingisa is up to and play detective coming up with all kinds of assumptions but she would be doing it all in the name of protecting me.

TWENTY SIX

NTOMBI

Makhulu accompanied me to the local clinic yesterday after the

excessive vomiting I've been experiencing. I've been afraid to go to any health care practitioner because I'm not ready to hear how I won't be able to carry the baby to term again, once was enough. Hearing a nurse say it again will crush my heart because the circumstances are different this time. I was not pregnant when I found out that Bonga damaged my womb, but now I am. I'm still trying to figure out how Bonga managed to not put a single bruise on my face yet managed to tear my womb that night. Or was I born with an

imperfect womb? The nurse said I'm suffering from Hyperemesis Gravidarum, it's when a pregnant woman gets severe morning sickness. I've also been having server fatigue. So much so that I can no longer assist Makhulu with some household chores. She has been nothing but a sweet heart and my best friend since we found out I'm pregnant. She was the one who broke the news to Tamkhulu while I sat nervously in the other room waiting for him to charge at me with words of anger. He did the opposite. He came to hug me and told me that

they will be with me in this journey until the baby is born and help raise him. Makhulu has been trying to put me on her pregnancy friendly eating plan but I can't keep anything down. The only thing that manages to stay in my tummy is plain yogurt and that does not count as food. We have not told anyone else yet because Makhulu believes it is still too early to let outsiders know. I respect her beliefs so I have not gone against them. I appreciate how they have been supportive but I wish they would not get attached to the baby. I'm sure I'm having

these severe morning sickness because my body has already started to reject the baby. Even if the baby were to be born, he would not have been ours to keep. Somewhere is an agreement with my signature on it signing away any rights a mother would have to her baby. Liyema might not be practicing law but he knows the law well, I would have stood no chance against him.

My grandfather asked our neighbor to please drive us to see a gynecologist in a private hospital out of town. He can drive but he does not drive long

distances any more. I don't know where they got the money for the doctor from because all of Tamkhulu's livestock is still here, all of it. Makhulu told me not to worry about that and just be happy that I'll be hearing my baby's heart beat for the first time. I'd say "there might not be a heartbeat", and she does not want to hear me talk like that so I stopped because I could see it was breaking her heart. I have not fed off her positivity yet because I'm trying to be realistic. The three of us arrived early for my appointment and decided to go

eat something while we waited. The food stayed down but as soon as we got to the doctor's office, I vomited all over the floor. I could not make it in time for the bin. The three people who are with us had looks of pure disgust on their faces. One lady even walked out and I do not blame her. All the food I ate was literally on the floor and not in a decent way. The cleaner came and said I should not worry about it, he will clean everything up. Makhulu insisted that he just bring her a bucket and mop and she'd clean up but he would not have it. I thanked him

but felt bad because he has to clean up my dirty mess. The doctor was finally able to see us, and aside from Zim I've never seen another black female doctor, so I was happy to see another. Tamkhulu said he will wait outside because this is "woman business". The doctor asked a couple of questions before instructing me to take some water. Both Makhulu and I did not understand why my bladder needed to be full but she explained that it makes it easier for her to see what is going on. I drank four glasses of water and prayed I

don't vomit again but I managed to keep it down. Once my bladder was full, she asked me to go lay on the bed. Mahulu moved with me from the seats to the bed, never letting go of my hand. She has never seen a baby while it's in the womb before, so she was looking forward to see her great grandchild. The doctor ran her little machine over my smooth gel filled belly. She put her face closer to the screen to get a closer look. Makhulu and I looked at each other.

Makhulu: "What do you see, Doctor? I can't even tell what

I'm looking at. Where is the bay?", she asked in panic.

Doctor: "Well it seems like you will be welcoming more than one baby!", she said with a smile.

Makhulu: "Twin?", she asked with a big smile on her face.

Doctor: "I see thre...wait...wait....I see baby number four", she said with excitement. I feel my body going numb.

Makhulu: "Four babies at once?", her smile was replaced by a shocked face.

Doctor: "Yes, I've never seen an ultrasound for quadruplets, well not with my own eyes anyway.

This is such a miracle and so exciting. Do you know how rare this is?", she said still smiling.

Makhulu: "Where are they?", she stood closer to the screen.

Doctor: "Right there", she said pointing at different part of the screen.

Makhulu: "I have never heard of a woman being pregnant with four children.", she looked at me still shocked.

Doctor: "It happens mostly when a woman conceived with the help of IVF but there are those rare occasions where it happens naturally", she said.

Makhulu: "What is that now?", she asked. The doctor explained to her. Makhulu looks confused. "Well good thing my grand baby is one of those who conceived naturally. Oh but God is indeed filled with great wonder. Four babies?", she added sounding excited.

Doctor: "How are you feeling after hearing the great news, Mommy?", she smiled. I could not

answer because I do not know how I feel.

Makhulu: "She is still shocked. I'm still shocked and my husband will not believe this news. Doctor what about the womb? My granddaughter has this belief that hers is damaged?", she looked at me and shook her head. I swear Makhulu thinks I'm joking when I say that I can't carry to term. maybe hearing the doctor say it, will make it sink in. The doctor asked if she could get her colleague to come and double check if she is right about everything. Makhulu agreed on my

behalf saying that a second opinion is good. A male doctor came in and also checked. They both agreed that I'm pregnant with four children and both said my womb looks like it is in good condition. More test were done because the doctors said as miraculous as being pregnant with quadruplets is, it can also be dangerous to both mother and babies. They listed all the things that could go wrong and made my grandmother worry even more. I'm going to receive the results of some of the tests in a day or two. After that the doctor asked

if I wanted to hear their heartbeats and Makhulu said yes on my behalf once again. The sound of their hearts made me cry. I'm not sure why. I guess it made it all real. I'm pregnant and with four babies. The doctor explained how it might have happened. Saying that a single egg could have split into four or four different eggs were fertilized at the same time. She thinks the babies were conceived naturally and I was not about to tell her otherwise, not with my grandma present. During the embryo transfer, the doctor at

the fertility clinic said he would transfer two embryos for better chances of conception. Could it be that those two embryos each split into two? I did not even know that four babies born at the same time are called quadruplets. The doctor said multiple pregnancy babies get born early and via c-section. The doctor explained more but I heard nothing. I feel as though I'm sitting next to my own body, like I'm not quite one with it. Our visit with the doctors ended. We told Tamkhulu and he almost had a heart attack due to shock. Who

could blame him? I cried the whole way while going back home. We arrived home and I went to my bedroom. The fact that my door is curtain does not help much because I need privacy at the moment. Makhulu came in and laid next to me.

Makhulu: "Ntombi", she said my name softly but I did not respond. "My baby this is big news for us all. We will go from a family of three, to a family of seven. I have never raised so many children who are at the same age before but I up for whatever comes. We might not be rich but

we are not poor either. We will help you raise those blessings."

Ntombi: "There will be no blessings to raise, Makhulu.", I said in a whisper.

Makhulu: "You heard what the doctor said. She said your womb looks well, she even took another machine just to be sure. Please stop saying there will be no children to raise. It breaks my heart"

Ntombi: "You don't understand", I said in frustration.

Makhulu: "That is why I'm here. I want to understand because

you keep saying that i won't understand yet you don't tell me what it is that I won't understand. Is it about the father?", I nodded.

Ntombi: "The man you think is the father is not the father", I confessed.

Makhulu: "Oh okay...I was not expecting that. Who is the father then?", she said trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. I'm sure she thinks I had sex with multiple men.

Ntombi: "His name is Liyema Elephant", I told her everything,

not leaving out a single detail.

"I'm sorry, Makhulu", I added and she kept quiet for a long while.

Makhulu: "This is all so complicated. Is this Liyema character a man you would want to have in their lives? Is he kind?", her question made me smile because he is kind.

Ntombi: "He is a good man, Makhulu. That does not matter though because even if he was a bad person I could not stop him from taking them.

Makhulu: "These are you children, Ntombi. If he did not want you to

bond with them, he could have gone with his first option and use the other lady's eggs but even that would not have stopped you from bonding with them because they are growing inside of you. You crying when you heard their heartbeats is just the beginning. Wait until they move. My girl wait until you hold them in your arms. What that Bonga boy made you do is wrong and I'm disappointed that you let him but I won't throw stones at you when I should be comforting you. What exactly does this agreement say?"

Ntombi: "They are his."

Makhulu: "Well he wanted only one, so technically only one is his", she said and I almost laughed.

Ntombi: "We can't separate them, Makhulu. Liyema will want all his children and he is within full right. I'm not ready for motherhood anyway. I will carry his children and give them as per our agreement.

Makhulu: "You think that is what you will do but wait until you fall in love with the lives growing inside of you. This pregnancy is already making you sick. This boy should be grateful that you are

willing to carry them. How will he raise them alone?"

Ntombi: "They have money"

Makhulu: "All of this is giving me a headache. I need a sweet cup of tea and process it. I + has been a long day, from finding out you're pregnant with four children to having found out that you signed the rights to them away to some chloal who thinks raising a child alone is easy. Why do you children do these things?"

Ntombi: "I'm sorry, Makhulu"

Makhulu: "Let us not tell your grandfather about the rest of

the story, I don't think he will understand. You should tell your father that he is going to be a grandfather. I do not want him to say we keep him in the dark"

Ntombi: "Yes, Makhulu"

Makhulu: "What is the worst that could happen if we don't tell this Liyema about the babies?"

Ntombi: "I go to jail when he finds out, and he will find out eventually. Life has a way of revealing secrets even if it is after years"

Makhulu: "Maybe he will understand that they need you as

much as they need him. You said he is a good man"

Ntombi: "A good man I whose trust I have broken. He won't want a con-woman to raise his children"

Makhulu: "Oh Ntombi then what now?"

Ntombi: "I try to carry them as long as possible, give birth and hand them over to their father"

Makhulu: "Ntombikayise, mark my words, you will not be able to just give them away. You underestimate the bond between a mother and her children."

Ntombi: "I need to rest now. May I please sleep?"

Makhulu: "Yes, sleep. This day has been long. You gaining weight and already showing makes sense now. Four babies?", she said with her smile while holding up four fingers.

Makhulu finally made her way out of my bedroom. I took my phone and searched for true stories of women who have had quadruplets before. There aren't many stories because it is not common for a woman to have four babies at once. It is most common with women who have done IVF. The doctor mentioned something about

two of the babies sharing a sac. If I'm already so tired at just a few weeks, I can't imagine how I'll be in a few months. My grandparents also won't be able to afford to take me to private health care and I do not want my father to have more fights with his wife because of me. I know he did not get millions and he already spent most of the money by buying land and livestock. I'll have to depend on public health care. I can't tell Liyema now. I want to have a peaceful pregnancy so that his children can be healthy once they are born. In our

agreement it was stipulated that I'll be living close to him in order for him to be able to take me to doctor's appointments. I don't know anything about the law, so I don't know if I will be able to fight and say I want to give birth in the Eastern Cape. I don't want to go to Cape Town again. Even once the babies are born, I will call him and ask him to come get them. I don't know how he will react to the news of suddenly being a father to four newborns but that is his problem not mine. All that I have to do is stay strong and healthy and make

sure I don't bond with the babies. Hearing their heartbeats made me determined to stay pregnant as long as possible until all they are all well developed. I don't know how accurate the doctor was when she said my womb has restored itself but I pray it remains in good condition until they are born. I will remind myself daily that I'm just a surrogate until I give birth. Liyema is their father and I'm just the woman who is renting out her womb to him. I wonder if they will all look identical? "No, Ntombi", I said to myself. Such

questions might lead to me loving them because when I wonder what they will look like, I'll picture myself holding them. In the agreement it states that they will be taken away from me right after birth. Apparently once a mother hold her child for the first time, a lifetime bond gets formed. I can't and don't want to form that bond with the little Liyemas. Since Liyema wanted a boy, it means that I'm carrying four boys, four Elephant heirs. I don't know how Liyema will cope with four boys because I heard boys can be a handful. Ensuring

that his boys are born healthy and strong is the best apology I can give to him. I'm being unfair by not telling him now so he could prepare himself but it is for the best. We can't be under the same roof because of the tension that will be between us. I'm sure this won't be an easy pregnancy, my severe morning sickness and constant fatigue is a sign of that. It's best I remain here and be at peace. My aim is to carry them at least until week 33 but if I can go beyond that would be even better. I promised Liyema the gift of

helping him get a baby, I hope he will be happy to hear that it will be four boys. I got on my knees to pray. Asking that God keep me and the babies healthy and that I get through any complication that might come our way. They are God's gift to one of His treasured children and it is up to me to make sure they these gift get "delivered" to Liyema. I have not thought about how I'll break the news to Liyema once they are here but I'll take his approach on life this time by taking things as they come and crossing that bridge when I get to it. I'm

afraid that I will fail but I will leave it all in God's hands and lean on the support that I have as much as possible. "You are not their mother, only a surrogate", I thought to myself before I fell asleep. Makhulu is wrong, I won't bond with these kids. I just have to make sure that my emotions don't overcloud my logic.

TWENTY SEVEN

NTOMBI

I knew from the beginning that I'm most likely to have a difficult

pregnancy but I did not think it would be this worse. I'm six months along and I have been in and out of hospital. These little ones are clearly stronger than I give them credit for. Regardless of my ill health they keep growing. I've been praying for them and myself like never before and God has indeed been good. I've developed anemia and gestational hypertension about two months ago and it has been tough. The doctor recommended bed rest most of which was done in hospital. Makhulu and Tamkhulu have been my pillars of

strength. I would not have come this far had it not been for their prayers and support. My father is over the moon about being a grandfather of four children.

Makhulu said I should not tell the men the entire story yet because they will ask a lot of questions which might lead to me getting sicker due to stress. She has been trying to convince me to keep quiet about the babies to Liyema, but I can't do that. He is going to give them a much better life than I ever could. With him they will grow up in a safer environment in the suburbs, they

will never lack anything and they will attend great private schools. When I first got admitted to hospital my father was able to pay for private health care for me, but I had to stay there for two weeks and I knew it was too expensive for him. I've since been making use of public health care and the public hospital I've been in is not bad at all. The nurses and doctors are kind. One nurse advised that I sell my story to the media and get some money from it but I cant. The second it is out Liyema is bound to see it and he will take the first flight

to the Eastern Cape. I don't want him near me at this moment. The man must hate me and I can't afford to have such a negative emotion around me. I'm having difficulties already. I will call him when the little ones are born. We have not told Mrs B about the pregnancy and I feel bad for doing so but she knows Liyema. He might not be a close family friend to him but they are from the same church so they must have met. She will also tell him that I'm carrying his children and that he should ensure that I get the best health care services.

According to our agreement Liyema is to make sure I'm taken good care of medically while I'm pregnant and after the child is born should I need it. Private care would be great but I can't afford it and I do not want the person who can afford it close to me. The public hospital is very attentive when it comes to me because this will be the very first quadruplets born in their hospital. It will look great on their record when all babies are born alive and healthy. The only way to ensure they are is by taking care of the person carrying them so I have

full confidence in the care I'm getting.

I've been in hospital for the past three weeks and I do not wish to return here again until the day I'm due to come give birth. The doctor is happy with the progress of all four boys and there are no signs of birth defects. Down syndrome was the one thing I feared would happen because I've been doing a lot of reading on multiple pregnancies and one article stated that one or more of them babies could be born with down syndrome or other birth defect. To hear that they are all

healthy is a relief. Makhulu has been sleeping at the hospital for the three weeks I've been here. Today I'm being discharged after I was treated for the high blood pressure and anemia. I'm exhausted. I wish I could borrow someone else my body just for the day so I can get proper rest. I'm huge and my feet and ankles are swollen. I laid on the bed with Makhulu sitting on the chair next to me. She was exhausted too but soldiers on for my sake. The babies started to move, it's not the first time but it has never felt so powerful before. I told

Makhulu and she put both her hands on different parts of my belly. She loves it when they move.

Makhulu: "Are you four fighting for more space in there?", she asked the babies with a smile.

Ntombi: "It won't be long now. Soon they will have enough space to move about", I said with a smile.

Makhulu: "Ntombi?", she looked at me.

Ntombi: "Makhulu", she looked concerned.

Makhulu: "You love them", she said.

Ntombi: "Is that a question", I asked though I know it was not.

Makhulu: "I'm telling you, not asking you. We love them too. Your grandfather is already excited about having four boys to help him", she said and we both laughed.

Ntombi: "I do love them, Ma. Like I love Nana from next door. You are capable of loving kids that aren't yours too"

Makhulu: "But have you been in and out of hospital with Nana?"

Have you had to feel her move inside of you? Have you given birth to her?"

Ntombi: "No, but..."

Makhulu: "No buts. I did some reading of my own about this. If you and this boy did things according to the law, somewhere in that contract should state that you have a few days to decide if you want to keep them and share custody."

Ntombi: "I'm not ready to be a mother. All I want after giving birth and giving Liyema his children is to go back to school and

make something of my life. Even if I wanted to keep them, which I don't, but if I wanted to I'd be going up against a legal family. Liyema will make sure he wipes the floor with me. He has the qualification and the money to do so. I'm tired, Makhulu. Please don't do this to me>"

Makhulu: "Okay", she said in a whisper. The doctor walked in just in time.

Doctor: "Are you ready to go, Miss Poti?", he smiled.

Ntombi: "I've been ready since the first day I came here", we laughed but not Makhulu.

Makhulu: "I'm going to see if our transport is here yet.", she stood and walked out.

Doctor: "You have to be grateful to have her in your life. Grannies are a treasure.", he smile while examining me.

Ntombi: "I am"

Doctor: "Okay that is it from me. Remember to rest, rest and rest. I'm happy with your blood pressure and I'm hoping it stays in good condition and your anemia

also. I know it has been tough on you and your body has taken a toll but you are doing great so far. I'm looking forward to meeting these four but not yet. My goal is to keep them there as long as possible even if it is out of my control but the entire staff is hoping for the best."

Ntombi: "Thanks, Doctor", I smiled.

It's good to know that there are others who wish the babies well because it means more prayers. I talk to them sometimes and ask that they please remain put and so far it seems like they are

listening. I love them. If I did not love them then I would not have bothered myself much. I come to the hospital and go to my clinic appointments when I need to. I take my supplements and have not once complained about the treatment I've received for the high blood pressure and iron deficiency. I never said that I don't love them, all I'm saying is I won't and can't keep them.

Makhulu reading up of the laws of surrogacy proves just how much she wants them to stay with us. I want to give her what she wants but she can't want other

people's babies because it is not legal. I just want to focus on having a life of my own. I want to go get my degree, get decent job and live a good life. I'll sometimes wonder how the babies are doing because I care but I do not have any fear of them being ill treated by their father. With some luck Liyema will occasionally send pictures but if he does not then I would understand. I've been trying to not involve emotions in this to avoid attachment. I do smile when they move but only because I did not think they would have made

it so far. I'm happy because my body is able to help them grow. I've been going to church as often as possible. I've had some people gossip about my pregnancy. Some saying I was a prostitute in the city and got pregnant by a client and that is why no father is seen around. People can be cruel but I'm not going to church for them. Had it not been for God, I don't think these babies would still be alive. Mrs B was right when she said that no love is greater than that of Christ. No man could ever give such unconditional love. I've decided to

live according to God's teachings. I'm not sure if I could say I'm a born again Christian but I've repented and will try by all means to live a truthful life. I know there will be many temptations in life though. I don't know if I'll ever get married someday but I've decided to not have sex before marriage with another man again. I'm no virgin but I don't want to share myself in such a way with a man out of wedlock again. I know some men might insult me by saying I'm already damaged goods so why must they wait but if God's plan

is for me to get married, I know he will send me a man who will respect my decision and appreciate me. I don't know how I'll explain to that man that I have four children who are biologically mine out there but when I do, I hope he understands. I got dressed with the help of a nurse. The porter pushed me on the wheelchair to my father's car and we went home. I've broken my grandmother's heart and I'm sorry. My father's health looks better after I recommended that he eats clean. Liyema's

healthy lifestyle has thought me a lot. Tata seems to have gained some weight too. He looks his age again. I know his decease can not be cured but we can treat it, and what better way to treat it then eating food that is good for the body. I have not seen Nomvula and her daughter since that day we went to their house and I'm not complaining. I don't want anything negative around me. I want to keep my space clean, especially spiritually. I have not even went to the funeral when one of our neighbors died because I feared that there might be too

much sorrow which would affect us. Some would say I'm too overprotective but my grandparents get it. I laid on my back and brushed my bump. Poor things, I'm sure they really are fighting for space as they get bigger. I hope that won't make them want to come too early. I love it when they move because its like they all move at the same time. I sometimes don't know where to put my hands. I've been sick for most of the pregnancy but they are so worth it.

LIYEMA

The students have started their training with us and it has been smooth sailing, well aside from Zingisa coming to the office to "check" on the students. My mother said Zingi has been back in town for a while and according to her it's long enough for Zingisa to gather information about me so she could move in the same circles as me. I don't care which circles Zingi moves in as long as she does not try to befriend me. Life has been great. Business has been blooming and I've kinda made peace with my father. I suspect that he is trying to make me

Speak to Zingisa. I don't know what my father loves about that woman so much. If I ever was going to get married again, my second wife would clearly have come second best to Zingisa in Mr Elephant Seniors eyes. My brother seems to have gotten a girl that grounds him. The parties have become less and guy even enrolled into business school. Mma is not sold at all but I will give him the benefit of doubt. It's amazing how some women have a positive impact on their man's lives. I'm not lucky enough to cross paths with such women. I thought

Ntombi was one of those. She made me feel good when she was around. She felt "homy" if there is even such a thing but it was all an act.

Vusi, some friends and I got together for a well deserved chill weekend. It was all good until my boy decided to make a call and invite some ladies. The guys have no problem with it and neither do I but what I do have a problem with is being hooked up. There is nothing I hate more than that. Jacky one of the ladies who has not allowed me much time to breath was busy on her phone

telling me what was going on in her social media pages. I felt like putting on an invisibility coat and just disappear.

Jacky: "Oh my word! You guys won't believe what this chick just posted. Apparently where she works is a woman who is pregnant with like four babies. What the hell?", she said in her fake accent.

Haley: "How will she push them all out of her you know..", they all laughed. It was the most annoying moment of my life and I've had plenty.

Liyema: "Gents, just remembered that I have to help my brother with something important", I took a sip of my drink and stood.

Vusi: "What's going on, Bro. We are chilling for the first times after a long time. I called some pretty girls and Jacky want to get to know you better", he followed me to the door.

Liyema: "Lungile needs help with a business proposal assignment he got. If I don't do it today I won't get a chance because tomorrow is church and during the week you know how crazy it gets."

Vusi: We work together and go to the same church. I'll help after church. Come one when last did you have fun with a beautiful girl?"

Liyema: "Don't forget to use protection. I'll see you later.", I platted him on the shoulder and left.

If there is one thing I can not stand is shallowness and fakers and I sense that about those ladies. I know the aim was to just get into their pants but I'm not in the mood for such today. I'm a man and get tempted and aroused as much as the average

healthy man but I don't go around sleeping with just anyone. I've been with a few ladies since my divorce but I don't go around picking up random girls every weekend. I'm not judging men that do but some friends need to realize that we are not all the same. The only thing of interest Jacky said was the news about the lady carrying quadruplets. Had she given some intellectual views on the matter instead of joking about how the woman will push out the babies with her friends, I'd have listened. Have they never heard of a C-Section?

What a rare occurrence. I hope the mother has all the support physically, financially, mentally, emotionally and medically that she needs. I'm sure her husband is over the moon yet scared as hell. I know I'd be terrified if I was told I'd be a father of four babies born on the same day. I'm sending out prayers to them, especially the mother because it can't be easy. I'd most probably faint should I be told my woman is having quadruplets, some people are truly blessed though. I wonder if they will all be boys, girls or a mixture of the two

genders. How did it come about? Was it natural or did they make use of the help of IVF? Did one egg break into four or where four different eggs fertilized at the same time? Such wonders happen in the world and people still question if God exists? My mind was suddenly interested on this case. I love news that is not an everyday occurrence. I've got a curious mind. I wonder if the government will help the parent in some way? Usually they do. How will she breastfeed them all? I still think the father has not recovered from the news yet. I

have not even recovered from hearing that there is currently a woman in such a condition and it has absolutely nothing to do with me. Poor guy will go to work looking like the dead. One employee of mine looked like that when he just had a child. I can't imagine four newborns. Thinking about it now, I'm glad my plans of having a child of my own have been put on hold. I was not ready yet and God knew it. When I'm ready it'll happen but I pray it is not four at once. I laughed at myself for being so intrigued by something that is non of my

business. I put on my gospel music and I just enjoyed the ride home. I love being at my house. I only go out when I have to, to go network or just relax. I was about to pull my car into the driveway and straight into the garage because I have no plans for the rest of the day. I'm such an introvert. I can not drive my car I though because there was already a car parked in the driveway. It does not look familiar but all I know is that I'm frustrated by the unexpected visitor. Ma Eunice is here today to bake again because she does now

work on Saturdays. Maybe it's her ride back home. I parked outside my yard and walked in only to find Zingisa in front of my door. Could this day get any worse? She stood and like the spoiled princess she is, told e to have a word with Ma Eunice because Ma Eu refused her entry to the house and that is why she's sitting outside.

Liyema: "She hates it when people are around while she bakes. What do you want? How did you know I live here?"

Zingi: "It's a small world and people know you. All I had to do

was ask around. I want us to talk. Can we please go in?"

Liyema: "Talk", I said to her.

Zingi: "Liyema please", she pleaded thinking I'd let her in my house. "Okay, I've come to apologize again"

Liyema: "Apology accepted"

Zingi: "I miss you", she said.

Liyema: "Get your car out of my driveway. I want to drive mine in. O don't have time to listen to crap"

Zingi: "We used to be such good friend, baby" I was young and stupid but now I've matured. I'm

no longer that girl. I'm a woman now"

Liyema: "Good for you. I'm sure some man will appreciate that in you. I'm not him. Take your small tennis ball of a car out and leave"

Zingi: "We've been through so much together", she continued to plead. I'm losing my patience with each second that passes. I grabbed her by her arms and lead her to her car. "You know we were good. That is why I'm still able to evoke some emotion out of you", she added.

Liyema: "The only emotions you evoke in me are those of hate and disgust."

Zingi: "Because you still love me. Our history runs too deep", she said and had her tongue in my mouth before I could say anything. I pushed her off me and feel like vomiting.

Liyema: "The history of you cheating huh... the history of you...of yo...the damn history of you fucken infecting me with HIV? Oh but that can't be classified as history now can it because I'm still HIV positive because you could not keep your

damn legs closed. Get the hell off my property before there is hell to pay", I shouted and grabbed her by her arm again and put her in her car.

Her car reversed out of my driveway slowly. The nerve of this woman? When her car was out of sight I let my anger out by throwing around the pot plants that were by my front door. Ma Eunice came out running, holding a cake roller. She dropped it when she realized it's just me. The panic in her eyes shows how concerned she is. I finally calmed down and sat on the tiled area in front of

the door and broke down in tears. My second mother wrapped her arms around me while insulting Zingisa that was no where near us. I have not spoken to anyone about my status yet. That is why I say my family does not know the damage that woman has done. I know that HIV is no death sentence but to know that I got it from someone who was suppose to remain true to me and our marriage and protect me as I did her hurts. Zingisa and I tested way before we got married and we were both negative. I remained faithful

while she did me wrong. During the divorce process she set me a text saying I should go test. I at first thought its her way of scaring me but I was wrong. My lawyer advised that I go anyway. I went to the doctor full of confidence because I did not think I Liyema Elephant could test positive for HIV. My confidence was watered down when the doctor said I'm indeed positive. She took the virus from her partners and brought it home. No pain comes close to that, not any I've experience anyway. I know I'm yet to live a long life. I know

I might die today for reasons totally unrelated to my status but it has limited my life somewhat. Even though I've had a sexual partner or two after I found out, the fear of possibly infecting them makes the entire experience lose the magic. That is why I've stopped sleeping with women I meet even if they want a no strings attached, at the back of my mind I fear the condom will break. That is no way to do things so I stopped.

Perhaps its also the reason why I will never get married again. I'd have to tell the woman I'm

HIV Positive and possibly lose her because what negative woman wants to be married to someone who is positive? Will that woman be happy with using a condom for the rest of her life while married to me? I've accepted my status and try by all means to live a healthy life but has changed me.

TWENTY EIGHT

LIYEMA

Ma Eunice confessed to having known about my status for a while now. Apparently she found

my treatment on the kitchen counter one morning. I remember that day well but I thought I had left them on the bed because that was where I found them. Ma Eu said she put them there because had she left them on the kitchen counter I'd have known that she saw them. I usually keep them in the safe but I must have had a lot on my mind that day. What shocked me was how informed she is when it comes to HIV/AIDS. Not once has she shown me pity because she understands that I'm not sick. Yes, I'm living with the virus

but I'm healthier than most people who are negative. I had to tell her the entire story about how I got infected. The hate she has towards Zingisa became more intense. It felt good to tell someone about my status. I wish I was as informed as Ma Eunice is when I found out. It would have saved me a lot of heartache because I thought I was going to die. I drank my sorrows away which made me sick because alcohol and treatment do not go hand in hand. I was invited to church by an old friend and I never stopped going since. If it

was not for church I would be a drunkard right now or even dead. Changing my lifestyle was not easy because I had to give up a lot. The booze that was my escape from my personal hell had to go, constantly eating junk had to go. I have not had a single drop of alcohol in five years, I go to gym as often as my schedule allows me and I eat healthy. I no longer hate being HIV positive because that will not make me negative again. What I do hate is that fact that the person who infected me wanting us to work things out after all that

happened. I was forced to call her boss and report her behavior. Mr Tom handled the situation professionally because he does not want the drama one employee causes to affect out work relationship and the careers of the young people we are working with. Zingisa being Zingisa would not let things rest and has been coming to the office and to my house. I had to tell security to not let her in and got her a protection order. I'm not afraid of her, I'm more afraid of what I might do should she push me to the edge. She brings out the

worst in me and perhaps someday I won't feel anger and hate towards her but not today. My fear is that she will go around telling people that I'm HIV positive. The business world is small so rumors spread fast. I don't want any of my business associates to know about my status because there are a lot of people who are not educated enough about HIV. Some might even take their business elsewhere due to not being about to working with an HIV positive man. There will be the few who will pity me and that is the last

thing I want. The decision to tell my family know was not an easy one to make but I want to do it. I know things might not be the same afterward but I've dealt with worse. Ma Eunice helped me prepare the food before going home. I don't think I appreciate this woman much. She has been in my life since I was six years old. As soon as I got my own place and was able to afford her services she stopped working for my parents and came to work for me. I could not even afford the money she got from the parents but she stuck with me until I

was finally able to pay her what she deserves.

My nerves are getting the better of me. It seems with each second that passes they become worse. I'm even considering canceling.

How will they react to the news of having an HIV positive son and brother? The door bell rang and I took one last deep breath before going to open. Mma's excitement filled smile made me feel less afraid. Ta is his usual self, he looks annoyed already. Lungile came running to the door and wrapped his arms around both Mma and Ta's shoulders. Mma

could not contain her joy because it's not everyday we are all together and it is not everyday I'm the one responsible for getting us all together. Mma gave me the chocolate cake she brought for desert and I let them in. Lungile cut a slice of the cake and stuffed it into his mouth and it worked on Mma's nerve.

Mma: "Lungi, no ma that is not how things are done. So tell me when will we meet this girl?", she said while taking the cake away from him.

Lungi: "When I'm ready to lobola her."

Ta: "As if that will ever happen", he said sarcastically. "Liyema how is business?"

Liyema: "It's great, Ta thanks and yours?"

Ta: "Going from strength to strength. There is this young man who is just breaths law and oh does he know it. I'm telling you, soon he might be a partner"

Liyema: "That's good. He must know his stuff because you are not easy to impress"

Ta: "I'm easy to impress if people just did things the way I want them to and not stray away"

Lungi: "Why do I feel like that was a personal attack on us?"

Lungi: "If the shoe fits, my boy"

Mma: "No business talk"

Lungi: "When he is with us it's always about that", he said while looking at Ta.

Ta: "Am I "he" to you now, no longer Tata?"

Lungi: "Would you have preferred I said "she"?"

Ta: "Don't you dare talk to me like I'm your peer. You are not too old to be taught manners, boy. You don't come into my damn house..."

Lungi: "You are but a visitor in this one". Ta stood and rushed outside in anger.

Mma: "Was that necessary, Lungile?"

Lungi: "It's his fault. Bhuti why didn't you call me and Mma only? You know how tense things can get with him around"

Liyema: "I'm starting to think I made a mistake indeed. I can't handle you guys together. You are much easier to be with in one on one meetings"

Mma: "He is just stressed. I'll go get him"

Lungi: "Why must he cause drama and we be the ones to go beg him to calm down? It's been like this since we were kids. We only laugh when Ta laughs because we can't be happy when he is not happy. Let him stay in his expensive car maybe it will m..."

Mma: Stop it! You will not wish bad on your father", she said while pointing at him.

Lungi: "I was going to say maybe it will miraculously serve him food. I think that is well wishes, Mma". Mma clicked her tongue in frustration and went out.

Liyema: "The drama that follows you guy. Why are we like this? Surely we can for one night act as if we like each other", I said while brushing my face with my hands.

Lungi: "I'm sorry, Bhuti", he said sincerely.

Lungile and myself soon turned the conversation into a joke and laughed until our eyes teared my brother seems happy and nothing beats that. Ta finally calmed down after Mma begged him to. Shouldn't the wife be the dramatic one? I don't know how my mother is able to stay married

with someone this uptight. Most people say I'm like him but there is no way I'm like this. I look like him but I don't act like him. We both have intense personalities but they could not be more different. Mma helped me serve the food and we ate in peace.

Lungi made sure he dishes out the jokes. Though most were dry, it felt good to laugh. Ta wanted to go home after eating his food saying he has a lot of work waiting for him at home. I asked that we go sit down in the lounge first because I have to tell them something. My heart feels like its

about to beat out of my chest. My parents sat opposite me and Lungi next to me. I took a deep breath and told them what I called them here for. Lungile face down while holding his shiny bald head in his hands. Mma can't spot crying, it was as though I've just announced the death of a loved one. Ta's faced is expressionless. Lungile: "I love you, bro", he out his arm around my shoulder and hugged me.

Liyema: "I love you, man", I had to blink away my tears. Mma crying and not saying a word made things difficult.

Mma: "You see what that girl did to our boy? In your eyes she can do nothing wrong. Well she gave my child HIV. I will never forgive you, Lubabalo", she said between sobs.

Liyema: "Mma my aim was not to cause problems between you two. I just want my family to know"

Mma: "Had he not forced you to marry that thing, we would not be here right now", she said while pointing at Ta who still sat motionless.

Lungi: "My brother does not need this right now. You heard him, he's not dying. Stop crying like you

just found out he has a day to live, Mma. Go argue at home too geez"

Mma: "I will slap you. You forget who the parents are here I see. You I will never forgive you for what you have done"

Ta: "So Liyema having Aids is my fault?"

Lungil: "He does not have AIDS"

Ta: "You shut your damn mouth. I've tolerated you disrespecting me all night long but it stops now", he stood ready to punch Lungi but I stood between them to stop him.

Lungi: Bhu, I'll come by tomorrow again when you are alone. I can't stand this anymore. Check you", he shook my hand and left.

Ta: "I'm going too", he took his keys.

Mma: "I'm going to sleep here tonight. I can't be with someone responsible for making m..."

Ta: "I'm not responsible for this. Like you've told me many times that Liyema was not responsible for Lulonke's death, well I'm the one to blame for this either.

Mma: "Well that was low Lubabalo.", Ta grunted in anger before rushing out.

Mma tried to hug me but I was not in the mood. I went upstairs filled with regret. I knew my father would react in a negative way but to bring Lulo into it was uncalled for. I locked the door behind me as soon as I entered my bedroom. I took off my clothes and headed for a shower. Once the steamy hot water touched my skin all the bad memories of Lulo's death came rushing to my mind. It was a quiet night and I was busy preparing for my final

exam. Both Lulo and I were doing grade eleven back then. She had finished her exam a day before me and decided to sneak out without anyone knowing. The house phone kept ringing that night and much to my frustration because I was trying to study. The person on the other line was persistent and no one else seemed to be awake to answer the phone so I went to the lounge to answer. On the other line was a terrified Lulo who was supposed to have been asleep at home but instead was out drinking with friends. She got into some trouble and the people

she went with abandoned her and that meant she had no way of coming back home because she was on the other end of town. She begged me to go get her without the parents knowing. I had already learned how to drive but had no license but my sister needed me so it just made sense for me to steal my father's car and go get her. I moved quickly because I did not want anyone waking up. I managed to get the car out of the yard without waking the parents up. I drove to where she said she was and found her safe. She was scared

and cold because one could barely call what she had on clothes. We got into the car and I drove as carefully as possible following each rule of the road as my father taught me. I was about to make a turn as the robots turned green but an oncoming car skipped a red light and drove into us. He drove right into Lulo's side. Things went blank for a few seconds but I came to soon after. There were flashing lights all around the car. I looked to check if Lulo was okay. All I could see was metal and no Lulo. Help came and I was soon cut out of the car waiting for

them to do the same with my sister. The paramedic kept on going on about how I must get the car in my forehead check out. I went mad on them and made all kinds of threats if they did not take my sister out. One man told me that Lulo got crushed by the car. My entire world collapsed from right under my feet that night. I remember running to the passenger side where they were busy cutting parts of the car to get her out. All I saw was blood. The blood of my own. The police arrived and asked me a lot of questions. I remember begging

them to arrest me for what I've done while sobbing like no other. My parents were called and my relationship with my father was never the same again. Perhaps that the reason why I did everything he wanted me to because it felt like I had to make up for what I did, for killing his only daughter. It was a dark time for my family but we patched things up somehow. It turned out the driver was drunk and I still don't know why I did not get arrested. Mma kept on saying it was because I was underage and it was an accident.

That might be true but it was an accident that came with a great price. I lost my twin sister that night and I know I was not responsible for the accident but I could not help but blame myself. After tonight, I know that Ta still blames me as well. I kept on saying "Ta is going to kill you for this should he find out" to Lulo, only to have me being the one to kill her. I still remember her last words "you won't tell on me. We will sneak in again, sleep and wake up tomorrow as though nothing happened. You love me too much to snitch on me, twinzy", were her

last words before she planted her full soft lips on my cheek. The water that flew down my body was now mixed with my tears too. I miss her. I wonder what she would have become had her life not been cut short. Had I not played hero and told on her instead so the parents could go get her, would she still have been alive? I tried to think why Ta would bring that up tonight of all nights and I realized why. It's our birthday tomorrow. I have not celebrated it since she died. Why would I? I understood where Ta's pain came from tonight. He

misses her too. I'm not angry at him for having brought her up tonight. We all miss her and tomorrow will be a dark day for all of us with all this tension going on and it being mine and Lulongke's birthday. I sometimes pray for her to give me a sign that she has forgiven me but I'm still waiting. I need to know that she is in a better place and that she does not blame me. Maybe that will make me let go of the burden of guilt I've been feeling. I miss her.

NTOMBI

The five of us have managed to make it to month seven and two weeks. I've been having severe Braxton Hicks that made my doctor think they were on their way but it seems these little ones just like attention. I have had to return to hospital a few times unfortunately because my blood pressure just would not stabilize. Makhulu has been praying like never before and so have I. The hospital staff are ready for me just in case I go into labour. My aim is still to carry until eight months because I know nine is just not going to happen. My body

is sore and I've spend most of this pregnancy in bed resting. I'm huge and I suspect I'm yet to gain more weight. We were having dinner when I felt a sharp pain and passed it off as another false alarm. Makhulu must have noticed my discomfort because she asked if I'm fine. I told her it's the braxton hicks again. She asked Tamkhulu to go call Yanda, the neighbor who has been our driver to come take us to hospital. I tried to tell her it's not necessary but she reminded me that I'm not having a usual pregnancy. Yanda came and eight

of us rushed to hospital. I say eight because the little ones are people too. Makhulu was right, it's not another false alarm. This pain feel different, more intense. I was silently praying for them all to be okay. We arrived at the hospital and Makhulu told Tamkhulu to go in and get help. The staff rushed out with a wheelchair. I'm sure they knew it was me because we have become residents at the hospital. The nurses helped me on the wheelchair when I heard one shout "she's bleeding". I started to cry because I thought I was

going to lose them. After all the months we got through they can't give up now. My doctor was called and soon there were a lot of hands all over me. I'm confused and crying at the same time.

They told us that an emergency C-section had to be done and they would have to put me to sleep completely. I was hoping they would just numb my bottom part so I'd be present when they are born but my doctor knew best. I was prepared for theater and an oxygen mask was put over my mouth and nose. The fear I am feeling can not be described. I

feared for my life and for those of the babies. I felt drowsy and soon fell asleep. I closed my eyes knowing that I have grandparents on their knees praying. Suddenly I was in a bright lit theater room but the light did not come from the lights above me that make sure doctors see what are doing. She is standing above me. I can not see her well but I could see her teeth because she is smiling. She went to stand next to the doctor. She held up one finger, then after a while held up two and then three and then four. The excitement on

her face while holding up the four fingers was contagious because I smiled too. She jumped up and down still holding the four fingers and smiling. She disappeared into thin air but left me feeling calm. I struggled to open my eyes. It feels as though someone is closing them as soon as I try to open them.

Makhulu: "Ntombi?", I heard her voice from afar. "Ntombikayise", I finally managed to hear her properly.

Ntombi: "Ma", I said softly.

Makhulu: "How are you feeling?", she stood and faced me. She smiled and kissed my forehead.

Ntombi: "I was in labor. Where are they? Are they all okay?"

Makhulu: "All four of them are alive and well, my baby. They are small so they put them in incubators. We were more worried about you"

Ntombi: "Why?", I asked and the doctor walked in.

Doctor: "It's good to see you awake. You scared us there for a minute."

Ntombi: "Why?"

Doctor: "There were complications, Ntombi. Uhm how do I put this?", he asked himself. Ntombi: "Give it like it is, Doc.". the doctor and Makhulu looked at each other.

Doctor: "You were bleeding severely from the time you came in. It caused a lot of complications. For a second we thought we would lose you and one of the babies. Due to the non stop bleeding, we were forced to perform a hysterectomy to stop it. We tried all the other options, this was our last and only option to save you"

Ntombi: "What is a hys...hyste..."

Doctor: "Hysterectomy is the removal of the uterus, meaning the womb"

My world came crashing down. I thought that my womb had healed somehow but it turns out it was only hanging by a thread so I'd carry the babies. I don't have a womb. I've never heard of a woman without a womb. I know some women can't have kids but they have wombs. Makhulu cried more than I am. I think it's because she realizes that the quadruplets are my first and last children and they are not even

mine. I'm sore but asked them to take me to see them babies. The doctor said I needed to rest more after the procurer but I had to see them. After great debate he finally gave in and organized for me to be taken to them. The nurses and other staff congratulated me. The doctor pushed me to the ward the babies are in. he showed me my four, well Liyema's four. Two are two sets of identical twins. One of the babies has tubes in his nose. I asked the doctor why and a machine next to the incubator made a sound and the doctor

rushed to him. I don't know where I got the strength but I managed to stand. The nurse turned his head gently and started to rub his arms, legs and back. I asked the doctor what is going on and he said the baby's breathing has paused and it might last up to 15 seconds. Why would his breathing pause? The doctor said his lungs have not developed as well as the other boys. I watched while the nurse rubbed his little feet and after a few seconds she said he's breathing again. The horror stories on public hospitals and

how some babies died in their care haunted my mind. The doctor said he might outgrow it as he gets older but it is too much for me to handle. I can't stand to see him stop breathing again and watch while they try to stimulate his breathing again. The nurse asked if I wanted to try kangaroo care because it is good for premature babies. I asked her to show me, if it will help I'll do it. She put the baby with breathing problem on my chest and took his identical twin and placed him next to him. He made sure that we were all comfortable and warm. They are

tiny and to see the tube in the one's nose broke my heart. Their arms touched and it is the most beautiful thing. To have them on my chest made me fall in love. How could I not? After an hour the nurse places the other two on my chest. They carried more weight and looked a bit bigger. Tears started to flow down my cheeks and the nurse comforted me by saying I can relax they are fine. That this Apnea infection one of them has will be treated with care.

Ntombi: "If I have an option of taking them to a private hospital would you advice it?"

Nurse: "Yes, it's no secret that public health care takes second best to private care. If you can then have your children transferred.", she said while checking on other babies.

After two hours of pure magic. Magic is the only word I can think of when I think about having my...Liyema's children on my chest. The nurse suggested that I rest and come back to try and breastfeed. It's 5am and they were born at 1:33am. I asked

the nurse if my grandparents could come in and meet them. She allowed it and it was love at first sight for Mkhulu. I can't blame her. Tamkhulu was quiet and when I asked he said he refuses to open his heart to them only to have them go again leaving them brokenhearted because it will remind him of the time my mother left. He stood at the door not wanting to come close to the incubator. It broke my heart but I understand where he is coming from. Makhulu on the other hand was putting her hand in each incubator greeting each baby and

thanking God for their good health. We explained to her why one has a tube in his nose. She placed both her hands on the top of the incubator and started to pray. The moment was beautiful but reality has come. I have to call Liyema and have him transfer them to a private hospital. I'm grateful for all the public hospital did for us but they deserve better care. Makhulu pleaded with me to wait just a day or two before I call fearing that Liyema would take them as soon as he arrives. He is going to take them and it's best he does it now while

we aren't too attached. My words left my grandmother crying and my grandfather walked out the room. I apologized but told Makhulu why it should be done. I'm sure Tata will arrive when they are gone already. I hope that he will forgive me for breaking all their hearts.

Makhulu gave me her phone and I dialed Liyema's number. The pain I'm feeling is unimaginable but I don't want drugs for the pain because they will make me sleep. I need to tell Liyema before I pass out. Th phone rang and went unanswered. I tried once

again and again and again but no luck. I dialed Mrs Elephants number. Perhaps she could call him and get him to take my calls. She answered quickly.

Ntombi: "Ma it's me Ntombi. Please do not hang up. This is important", I spoke quickly before she could end the call.

Mrs Elephant: "Ntombi this is not the right time. If you want to apologize to him please wait a week or so, please. We had a rough night yesterday and I don't even want to imagine how he will be when he wakes up because...because..."

Ntombi: "Ma, this is more than just an apology. This is between life and death. Please call him and tell him to answer the calls from the 061 number", I pleaded.

Mrs Elephant: "I'm at his house. Tell me what it is then when he wakes up I'll tell him", she said. I did not want to do it but I have no choice.

Ntombi: "The IVF was a success, Ma. Please tell him that I need him to come to Peddie and transfer the babies to a private hospital. One is not doing so well", I heard a cup or plate break after I told her.

Mrs Elephant: "Don't play with us like that. What do you mean?"

Ntombi: "I mean Liyema has just become a father to four beautiful little boys. I need him to..."

I could not finish my sentence because the pain I'm in won't allow me to. I called for help and a nurse showed. My body started to shake and I'm heating up by the second. The doctor came rushing in. he kept shouting my name and opened my eyes and flashed it with some light. I could not respond to his calls because I could no longer hear them. I can still feel my body shake until I no

longer could. If bringing the children into the world the last thing I had to do, then it was worth it.

TWENTY NINE

LIYEMA

A few days ago Mama came knocking on on bedroom door like a mad woman. I thought she feared I'd killed myself because of what happened the previous night but she told me something I would never have imagined would happen. At first I thought

Ntombi was playing a sick game once again but Mma convinced me to go and see for my own eyes. She booked flights for us the same day and we hired a car to Peddie. I've never been to that part of the Eastern Cape. When we got to the hospital and asked for Ntombikayise Poti the staff knew exactly who we were asking for. Calling her "the quad mom". They called an elderly woman for us and introduced her as Ntombi's grandma. The old woman asked who we were and Mma was quick to say "he's the father of Ntombi's boys". I could see the

elderly couple was not pleased to see me. I asked to see the babies and because Ntombi said I'm the father they has no choice but to let me in. Mma and I were prepped to go see them. She cried the second she laid eyes on them, tears of joy. They looked small and the nurse explained the medical condition of the one who's breathing pauses. Mma said I should immediately arrange for them to be airlifted to Cape Town. I had doubts about their paternity. Who could blame me? For all I know they are this De Bongz's children. I don't trust

Ntombi at all. I requested for a DNA sample of one and sent it for testing. The lab called saying that the tests are ready, they are indeed mine. Mma: "I don't know why you bothered. I saw they are ours the second I walked in. These two look like you and the other two look like Lungi and Lulo. They are beautiful. Make calls Liyema, they need to be seen by specialists just in case." I could hear her instruct me to make plans to move them to Cape Town but I couldn't move. Mma took out her phone and made a call. I walked closer to the

incubators to take a good look at them. My boys. Three young Elephant men, well not really men yet. I feel bad for having them tested to check if they are mine but circumstances forced me to do it. Why did Ntombi not contact me while she was still pregnant? Should they grow up knowing that I was not there during the time Ntombi was pregnant with them, they might think I didn't want them. When I heard about the woman pregnant with four babies from Jacky I wondered what I would have done had I been the father. I touched each

little hand and it broke my heart that one of them is sick. Mma walked back in saying that she has arranged for everything. We told the head of the hospital that we are taking them to Cape Town. The doctor who delivered them tried to convince us it's a bad idea but Mma assured them they will be in great care. Are there incubators in these things? The last thing I want is for my boys to freeze. The doctor went on about how Ntombi is still unconscious and therefore we can't take her babies until she agrees. Her babies? I showed

them the contract signed by Ntombi and I. They took a document that had her signature to compare and verify it's hers and the signatures matched. Ntombi's grandparents were called in and her grandmother called me every insulting word under the sun. The old man tried to stop her but failed. Ma Mlandu: "After all that my child did for you people this is how you thank her?", she said with tears in her eyes. Mma: "My son appreciates all that Ntombi has done, Ma but she knew what she was getting herself into." Ma Mlandu: "You've

been here for days and not one of you asked about her. She gave you what you wanted so now she can just go to hell, right?" Liyema: "Makhulu, Ntombi called my mother to tell her to come get the children. How else do you think we knew where to find them?", I asked calmly. Mma: "And I asked her doctor how she is and what was wrong with her but they kept on saying its confidential. I do care about your child, Ma and I understand your pain" Ma Mlandu: "Is it your daughter laying in a hospital bed while you worry about whether or not she will

wake up the next day you visit?". I can see Ma Mlandu's words hit deep because she looked sad. Ta Mlandu: "You will make yourself sick, dear. Please when Ntombi wakes up she needs us to be strong", he pleaded with his wife. Liyema: "Thank you for understanding, Tata" Ma Mlandu: "Understand? You think my husband avoiding conflict is understanding. I'm not afraid of you people. My child is in there without a womb because she gave birth to your children. Do you understand why we can't understand, Liyema?". I did not

expect her to say that. Ntombi lost her womb? Ma Mlandu fell back on the chair behind her but her husband and I acted quickly enough to ensure that we held her for support and gently put her down on the chair. She aggressively raised her arm and pushed me away. I understand where she comes from. She most probably supported Ntombi through her pregnancy. Felt the boys kick and all those magical moments I could not be a part of. I'm grateful to Ntombi because she could have aborted them but she did not. To hear that she lost

her uterus after giving birth cut me deep. I may not want her in our lives but I'm not animal, I feel for her. Mma pulled me aside. Mma: "Let's take Ntombi to a better hospital with specialists too" Liyema: "Mma I'm already going to spend huge amounts of money to make sure my boys are taken care of. I'm sorry but I can't afford to have Ntombi go to a private hospital in another province on my expense" Mma: "You forget that you have a legal obligatio to do so, Liyema. Do you want these people to sue you? Look at that poor woman. Can you

imagine what Ntombi felt when she was told those are her last babies knowing they will be taken away. I know you are angry at her but this is not the time. Your children are alive, and I could never thank Ntombi enough for the gift of making me a grandma. They were born on your birthday. She gave you the best birthday gift ever. You could not even soak that in on the day because all you wanted was bloody DNA test. Put your anger aside and help these people. I'll carry Ntombi's medical bills myself. I was thinking of moving into the apartment your

father got me but I'll
accommodate them" Liyena:
"Accommodate them?" Mma:
"There is no way her
grandmother will separate from
Ntombi. If we take Ntombi, we
take her granny too and that's
final." Liyema: "There are private
hospitals in the Eastern Cape. I'll
arrange for her to go to one. The
last thing I want is for her to
think I want her to be a part of
their lives." Mma: "You signed the
contract in Cape Town" She
walked away before I could ask
what that has to do with
anything. I knew Mma is fond of

Ntombi but I didn't realize it was this much. She walked to Ntombi's grandparents and knelt down before them. She must be explaining what she has decided on because she has make the decision without me. Ma Mlandu looked at me and nodded several times. Mma came back to me after a while saying her grandmother agreed and will go home to pack her and Ntombi's clothes. The hospital got alerted that Ntombi and babies will go to another hospital. The staff kept on saying "mother and babies", I didn't correct them but I don't

like hearing them call her mother of my children. The proper transport was arranged for them to be taken to Cape Town. Mma and I got the first flight out of Eastern Cape. After a few hours of landing we went to the hospital and they said all boys are doing well. They said Ntombi did a grear job because aside from one junior having apnea, the rest are in great shape and all are sure to go home soon. The news of them going home scared me because I'm not prepared for them. Where do I even begin? Mma bought food for Ma Mlandu but

she first wanted to see Ntombi. The doctor treating her told us that she had an infection.

Apparently the hospital she was at took great care of her. I gave Mma the "I told you so" look but she turned her cheek the other way. I asked to see them again. I can't believe I'm a father.

What will I name them? Will I do as my parents did and make sure they are all L. Elephant or perhaps choose a different letter in the alphabet? My brother is the first person I told and he was at the hospital before I said uncle. Lungi: "I thought you and

Mma went to see how gran is doing, man. But no you went to take four of us", he smiled not knowing which baby to look at first. Liyema: "More of us?" Lungi: "Oh check these two yellow bones looking like their uncle. Then there is two of you too. You have two sets of identical twins born on the same day. They crazy shit. Can I take a picture for Facebook? The boy is a whole uncle. Soon I'll have to go negotiate these goons's lobola". Liyena: "What? Just get out of here with that grown up shi... I mean things. No swearing when they are around. And you

sure as hell not going to post them, not while they are still here" Lungi: "Listen to you, daddy. Father for five minutes and already over protective", we laughed. "But on a serious note, I'm happy for you. Fatherhood suits you", he came to give me a hug. Liyena: "Thanks, little bro. Lungi: "So what about the girl? Uhm I'm not even sure if I should call her their mo.." Liyena: "Well don't call her their mom, she's not", he nodded. Mma: "Look at my two boys getting along...oh no wait, I mean my six boys", she walked in. Liyema: "Wow that was

cheesy", we laughed. Mma: "I can't wait for them to get out of here. I can't wait to brag to my friends about my four little bundles of everything adorable." The three of us were standing and fussing over them. We played around with some names and Mma only had cute nicknames to give. We have not told my father because we want to enjoy the feeling of joy for longer. I'm a father. I don't know what lies ahead but oh man am I ready for it. NTOMBI I woke up with a sore head. I looked around the unfamiliar room and I'm

wondering what is happening. A white nurse walked in and I don't remember having seen her. She greeted me and told me that she's going to get a doctor. The doctor came in and told me that I had an infection that is now under control. I asked where I am and they told me I was airlifted to Cape Town. I don't understand. Why would Liyema do that? They examined me and left when they were done. Makhulu walked in crying. She held me so tight that I felt her pinch me but I let her have her moment. She told me what happened. That Mrs

Elephant is the reason I'm here. Why would she waste her money on me? Makhulu told me that she'll be staying at Mrs Elephant's flat until I'm discharged and able to go back home. Makhulu does not seem to like Liyema. Cold and rude were the words she used to describe him. The boys are doing well too. I wish I can see them but Liyema would have me arrested the second I go to the baby ward. Mrs Elephant walked in. I started to apologize endlessly for what I did to her son but she gave me a hug when I expected a

slap. She said how sorry she is about my uterus having been removed. She left to give me time alone with Makhulu. Makhulu stood to go to the toilet. The door opened after she left. I thought she no longer needed the bathroom but when I looked at the door Liyema stood by it. My heart started to beat at an alarming rate. He stepped closer and I once again threw apologies left right and center. Liyema: "Mma told me you're awake" Ntombi: "Yeah and thanks for agreeing to transfer me" Liyema: "Thank my mother. She's the

reason you're here. Why didn't you call earlier, Ntombi? Maybe one of the boys would not be having this breathing problem." Ntombi: "I'm sorry" Liyema: "Sorry won't make my boy breath properly" Ntombi: "I said I'm sorry, Liyema! What else do you want me to say? I gave you your children. What more do you want? ", I broke down in tears. Liyema: "For you to acknowledge that he is sick because you were too selfish to call me. He is sick because of you" Ntombi: "Liyema, I don't have a womb. Do you realize the trauma that causes to a woman? I don't

have a womb dammit but you don't hear me blame them for it. They are premature and this breathing difficulty is because of that. I had no control over it"

Liyema: "Had you called I'd have taken you to the best doctors and you'd have carried to term", I laughed in disbelief. Ntombi: "It's a damn miracle that I even went beyond five months. Have you ever been pregnant with four kids, Liyema? Have you ever had to be admitted to hospital constantly because the pregnancy came with health complications? Have you ever sat and listen to

the doctor saying they might have to terminate one baby because your body was taking strain? Have you ever laid in bed unable to move and have your grandma who is not so young anymore bath you and dress you? Have you ever felt pain and fearing that your body might decide to give in and not only kill you but the babies you are carrying? Have you ever loved people even though you know they won't be a part of your life? Don't you dare, don't you dare", I shouted. Liyema: "I'm sorry that you had to go through that but

I'm not sorry for the anger I feel. He stops breathing at the most unpredictable times. I'm just angry that you kept away knowing you were carrying my children, Ntombi." Ntombi: "They are mine too", I said boldly. He was not expecting me to say it any neither did I. Liyema: "What did you say!?" Ntombi: "They are mine too and I have a few days to decide if I want to be a part of their lives. Well I want to be a part of MY children's lives".

Liyema: "Do you want to take me on for custody after breaking so many of our contract rules? ", he

looked at me directly in the eyes without blinking. Ntombi: "Says the man who paid me to be his surrogate when the law does not allow it. We both know the money you gave me was more than "loss of income" Liyema: "Don't do this, Ntombi. You will not only lose but you'll go to jail for trying to con me too. Who do you think the judge would agree on? A con thug or a business man able to look after them? I've been made a doormat by women once too many times but I'm close to jumping of the edge. Don't test me now, you'll come second best" Ntombi: "Well

I've been a doormat for men for far too long too. I'm already over the edge so bring it on" Liyema: "I can't believe this is happening to me!", he shouted. Mrs Elephant: "What is going on here? I'm just thankful that Ma Mlandu is far because this will make that woman sick. She's old. We have bigger problems here. Baby boy is not taking a milk he is given, it also gives him diarrhea. They also out of breast milk to purchase", she said while still pointing her fingers at both of us. Liyema: "Tell them to try another formula" Mrs Elephant: "They

don't want to risk it. They are suggesting that Ntombi tries to breastfeed him since she's here until they get more breast milk."

Liyema: "Over my dead body.

There must be breast milk we can buy around Cape Town" Mrs

Elephant: "He has diarrhea,

Liyema. He's weak and most

probably hungry. The other three are feeding well on formula but he is not. Let us give this a try.

That's if Ntombi agrees." Ntombi:

"If I can then I will gladly feed my son.", I said while looking at

Liyema. Liyema: "There must b...

Mrs Elephant: "Liyema this is not

about either one of you." I could see his jaw clench. I didn't care if he rubbed his teeth together until they broke. I will help where I can. I don't know if I meant that I want to be a part of the children or was it just anger speaking but Ma E was right this is not about Liyema and I. I was taken to where they are and my heart melted. They are bigger than I remember, all of them. The nurse sat me down and showed me what to do. Baby would not suckle. Makhulu suggested that I hold him difficultly and Ma E said Makhulu

read her mind because she was about to suggest the same. The nurse tried their method and I soon felt a grip around my nipple and it was all systems go. He opened his eyes and it was the first time I saw them. He is a beautiful boy. His eyes closed soon after and nothing in the world mattered. If I had four breasts they would all be feeding. Liyema could not stand the sight so he left the room. I know I disgust him and I know me feeding baby disgusts him even more but he did not have to go out and prove it to everyone. I regret everything

I said earlier on. I might not know the entire with his ex wife but I know it broke him and I don't want to add to that.

Having to come breastfeed gave me chance too see the others too.

The nurses say he responded well to the milk. Liyema came and said

I'm no longer to breastfeed any

of them because I'm not their mother. Saying he'll buy breast

milk if it's all the baby can

stomach. "She's not their

mother", he kept on repeating

those words whenever he got a

chance. I did not fight with him.

I don't have the strength. My

womb might be a thing of the past but it was able to carry these four and they are perfect. It's one thing to be told your womb is torn but another to be told it is completely gone. I'm mourning the loss of one of my most important body parts as a woman but at the same time celebrate what it could produce. Makhulu was right. The love I have for them and for my next door neighbours child can't compare. With them it's like my I see my heart in four different human forms. They are more than I could ever have imagined.

I don't know what will happen next but what I do know is I won't be able to just let go. It's in this moment when I realized that I've discovered real love. I love them unconditionally. I've never felt a better love.

THIRTY

LIYEMA

The last few weeks have been exhausting. Between me having to make time for work and being at the hospital I'm hardly touching ground. Ma Eunice has

taken it upon herself to remind me to take my treatment. Such things can easily be forgotten when there is plenty in ones mind so I'm grateful that she's my reminder. I have gotten an interior designer student to prepare the boys bedroom. I chose a student because I didn't have to spend a lot and it'll be great experience for her. She has done a remarkable job. I asked for an old fashioned baby room with plenty of bright colours and drawings on the wall. I'm not a fan of the modern ones that are grey and white. It's babies for

goodness sake. Vusi has been holding it down at the office while I'm busy with preparations to welcome the boys home. Ma Eunice reminded me of the dream she had about my house being filled with babies all around. She says it makes sense now and that I should listen to her more. I can't remember the last time I went to gym and my body is starting to feel the affects of it. Ntombi has been saying that she'll put up a fight for shared custody of the boys. She has not had her lawyer contact mine which can only mean she can't afford one. If it goes on

like this that time period that gives her right to keep them should she want to will expire and that will work in my favor. I regret the day I chose not to go with the other egg donor. Mma bought the boys so many things from toys to clothes and I don't want that. They will outgrow these clothes very soon. I made my way to the hospital hoping that today will be the day the doctor tells me they can finally come home with me. I'm determined to give them the best but I must admit their stay at the hospital has been costly. Once

I've settled into my new life as single father of four I'll have to grid harder than before. I hope that Ntombi can let go and honor our agreement. She keeps saying that it was not her choice to make and that she was forced into this but does not explain more. Wayne assumed she was forced too but without the full story I can't do much. When I arrived at the hospital she was already with the boys doing that kangaroo care thing. I don't know how many times I've told these people not to allow her to do it but they don't listen. They keep

saying it's good for them to hear her heartbeat because it's familiar and it'll make them be at ease. I took my boys from her chest and held them. I hate hurting her but its for the best.

Ntombi: "Have you decided on names yet?", she asked softly. I kept quiet and she got the message because she walked out.

Nurse: "Baby 4 was having another episode where his breathing paused. Mommy was alone with them and by the time I got here she was already massaging all needed parts to stimulate breathing. She did it

like a professional.", she smiled.

Liyema: "She's not their mom.

How many times should I tell you people that?" Nurse: "I'm sorry,

Mr Elephant.". The doctor came

in. Doctor: "Good new. They are all strong enough to go home."

Liyema: "What about baby 4 with breathing problems?" Doctor:

"We'll send you home with a

machine that will alert you when the breathing pauses. We'll show

you how to stimulate his

breathing. He can go home too.

Perhaps by the time he reaches a certain age he'd have outgrown

it. Let me go sign their discharge

papers" Liyema: "Thanks, Doc".
The doctor left the room and he left me the happiest man alive. "You guys are finally going home", I said to them with excitement. I called Ma Eunice and asked her to make the house extra clean. I hired two nannies from the best agency and had to call the agency telling them that the two should be ready to start working. Mma will also stay with us for a few months. I have not thought everything through yet but I'm sure things will fall into place eventually. I'm not even sure if I need two nannies or more. Ntombi

came into the room once again. Her eyes swollen and red. She is not wearing a hospital gown but a long black dress. Ntombi: "Liyema, I..." Liyema: "Look Ntombi I don't know what you want me to do. I...", I raised both my arms up in the air. Her reaction to me raising my arms made me stop talking immediately. She is holding both her hand in front of her face, it's a defence position. Did she think I'm going to hit her? "Ntombi?", I said softly while lowering her hands from her face. Her hands are shaking. Is she afraid of me?

She finally turned her head to look at me. The look of fear in her eyes numbed me. She took her hand out of mine. Ntombi: "I'm not here to cause trouble. I just want to tell you that I won't fight for shared custody. I don't have a lawyer because I can't afford any. Please look after them and if you get married please choose a kind woman that will love your children. Makhulu has gone to book us a bus. I've discharged myself and hopefully by tonight we will be on a bus back home"

Liyema: "I don't want things to end this way, Ntombi. I'm

grateful to you for everything and I mean everything. I'm truly sorry about your womb. You've given me four handsome little boys and on my birthday too.

Thank you but you knew where I stood. I wanted to raise the baby alone" Ntombi: "Yeah but it's babies not a baby. Anyway all the best of luck." Liyema: "Give me your bank details so I can transfer the rest of the compensation for loss of income. I'm sure had you not been pregnant you'd have found the job. So please allow me to do rig..." Ntombi: "I don't want your money.

Keep it for your boys. Can I please say goodbye to them first?" Liyema: "Yeah" I could not deny her the chance of saying goodbye to the boys. I watched as she picked them up one by one. She kissed each on the cheeks several times and telling them that they should grow up to be big and strong. I've got no doubt that she loves them. I understand why she kept quiet about the pregnancy too. I would most probably have stressed her to a point of having a miscarriage. I have not been kind to the woman who has given me

the most precious gifts. Am I doing right by keeping her away from them? I don't want to confuse my children. Liyema: "When I held my arms up, did you think I'd hit you?". She ignored me.

"Ntombi, you were shaking, clearly afraid", I said hoping she'd tell me what's going on. Ntombi: "I've told you that I've once been a doormat for love too. Can my grandma please come and say goodbye too when she comes back?", I just nodded. I only have a chance to look at her body properly now that she's out of hospital clothes. She somewhat

still looks pregnant. It made me realize just how much her body took to carry the boys. She has gained a lot of weight. Her breasts look bigger. There have been moments when her hospital gown was stained because of her breasts leaking. Mma has been checking in on Ntombi a lot. She told me that Ntombi has been giving some of her milk to babies whose mommies could not produce. I wonder when her body will stop producing milk? I feel like a jerk for what I'm doing and I'm sure everyone at the hospital think I am too. I mean here is a woman

who will never have children of her own again being separated from the only kids she has by some guy who keeps reminding everyone that she was just a surrogate nothing more. Mma has advised that I at least give Ntombi visiting right where she can have monitored visits with the boys. I don't know why I'm afraid of letting her close to us. I told her that there will be no such. Ntombi's grandma also came to say goodbye. I'm sure this has made the poor woma age more. I'm sorry for the pain I'm causing but I feel like I have no

other choice. Mma came with a seven seater hired car with carseat inside. I have to buy a bigger car. It seem I'll have to cut down on some luxuries for a few years. Mma dressed the boys in blue babygrows. She excused herself saying she is going to say goodbye to Ntombi. After some time everything was ready and we strapped the boys in the carseats. These four love to sleep. We drove home and got greeted by a big welcome home banner. Vusi, Ma Eunice, Lungi and even Tata stood before us. Tata stepped forward. I put the two

baby seats with the babies in on the table next to me. I was ready for some offensive words but he gave me a firm handshake and brief hug instead. Ta: "I wanted non of this but I went to go meet them the other day when you weren't there and I couldn't be against it anymore. You have given the family four strong boys to carry on the Elephant name. I'm proud", he shook my hand again. Liyema: "Thanks, Tata" Soon everyone held a baby in their arms. Each making turns to hold a different baby. I was more anxious about my last born's

breathing. I made sure I'm close to him to listen to his breathing. I'm not confident enough about simulating his breathing during one of his episodes but thankfully Mma is and she'll be with us for a while. I pray that my boy outgrows this thing. I can't wait until they are bigger and start to have different personalities. I look forward to all the milestones. I was not expecting Ta to be welcoming but it seems the boys have stolen his heart too. I've never felt at more peace with life. I've taken the boys sharing a birthday with me and Lulongke

as a sign that she's forgiven me. I wish there was a girl so I'd name her after her aunt but four boys are also perfect. I asked for suggestions for names we can't keep calling baby 1,2,3 and 4. Bandile, Bubele, Bukhosi and Banele. All being Mr B.Elephant. NTOMBI The decision to let go was not an easy one to make. I didn't know what to do first in order to be able too fight and have no money for a lawyer. I also only had a few days of a fighting chance left. All the odds were against me. At least I got to meet them because I was only

suppose to have given birth and have them taken away from me immediately to avoid bonding. That would not have helped because I had bonded with them when they still were inside of me. It seems like my father is also angry at me for letting go. I'm angry at me for letting go. Yesterday when Liyema had his arms up flashes of Bonga came to mind. I still remember those powerful back hand slaps he used to give me. My first instincts were to cover my face as I've done many times before. I hated that I showed such weakness in

front of Liyema who clearly holds no regard for my feelings. I tried to stop my hands from shaking when he held them but I was too shocked to. Makhulu and I have arrived back home this morning. Nana being the first person to come and visit because she heard from her uncle I went to have the babies. The poor child already claimed them as her friends and was disappointed to learn that they won't be staying with us. We have only been back for a few hours but I've already heard that rumours of me giving my children up for adoption going

around. They aren't too off the mark because it feels like I have. I feel like a huge part of me was left in Cape Town. Liyema's father paid me a visit offering me a lot of money to not fight Liyema. When I told him I don't want his money he started to make subtle threats. His mother on the other hand asked me to fight for visitation right as that will be more easy to get then shared custody. Saying that Liyema might trust me again and give me shared custody so we could co-parent. His parents are two very different people. Mrs

Elephant even confessed to hoping that Liyema and I would develop into more. I don't want her son. I never have and I never will especially after the way he treated me. Maybe Makhulu is right, Liyema might just be cold and rude. I don't want their money. Should the boys someday come look for me, I want them to know I didn't put a price on them. I want them to know that I wanted them but didn't have the means to fight for them.

Tamkhulu is still not speaking to me and I've been giving him space. Makhulu was sitting down

while I was busy cooking.

Makhulu: "What is your plan moving forward, Ntombi?"

Ntombi: "Application for University are open, Makhulu. I'll make sure that I get as many as I can and apply and I've found bursaries I can apply for too"

Makhulu: "So you'll leave us again?" Ntombi: "I'll come home for all school holidays. I've got to do this Makhulu. I'm tired of crying. I feel like I'm mourning people yet they are still alive.

School will keep me busy and while I wait I'll go to the supermarket and ask for a job" Makhulu: "Your

operation scar is not healed yet. You won't go pick up heavy boxes now". Tamkhulu walked in with hands filled with dirt. He's doing gardening. Ntombi: "Khulu, please I beg you to forgive me. I can't stand you not talking to me.

Tamkhulu: "I'm not upset with you. I just had big expectations. I've even secured the fence so the boys would be safe when playing. I wish you two told me sooner before I broke my own heart with expectations and excitement. That boy has not even paid damages and your grandma says that it's not

necessary. I don't understand the way you children do things these days. One minute I'm told I'm going to be a great grandfather and the next there are no children to be a great grandfather to.

It's too much, my baby. Give me time. I'm not as strong. I've got a sensitive spirit. That boy has no respect and I don't want to think about the type of influence he'll be to those boys. You have sacrificed a lot for nothing. Your grandma and I were afraid you'd die during one of your hospital visits because we could see the strain your body took. Now after

all of that, that boy who was not a part of the struggle gets to enjoy the rewards while the only reminders that you had children are the changes in your body because your body has not caught on that you're not a mother.

That's because nature remembers making you one. I'ts too much, man", he said before walking out. Makhulu: "Time is all that we all need. It has been an exhausting couple of months.

After time things will go back to normal" Ntombi: "Things will be better when I'm at school. I'll forget everything soon. I'll start

running and eating better so that by the time I go to school I'd have my usual body. Time heals everything", I said trying to convince myself. Makhulu: "Time helps us get used to the pain". I ignored her because I will be okay. There are plenty of women who have had to give their child away for various reasons and most of them are doing well. Nana's mother, Xoli is the only person I can call a friend in this place. She's a student at NMU in Port Elizabeth. I asked her to get me forms long before I knew I'm pregnant. She's home for a short

time and heard from her daughter I'm back. It's as if she read my mind by bringing applications forms. I told her the truth about why I don't have the children I was pregnant with not so long ago with me. Xoli:

"Nana was unplanned. I did not even want her and even considered ending the pregnancy but I instead opted for adoption. The second I held her in my arms after giving birth I didn't want to be separated from her."

Ntombi: "I don't want to talk about this. I'm sorry, friend but I didn't tell you so you'd give me

pep talks. I just want you to know the truth from me. I don't ever want to talk about it, ever. I just want to forget" Xoli: "I understand and I'll respect that. Uhm, friend...your dress is wet. I think you should buy breast pads just until your milk dries up". I looked at the wet, dark pink circles on my dress and tears fell freely. Xoli came around to hug me but I stood up before she could touch me. I excused myself to go change. I cut a sanitary pad in half and places the pieces in my bra. The nurse said it'll stop soon. I looked at the scar the

operation left me with and Tamkhulu was right, my body still has not caught on that I'm not a mother. I put on a clean dress and went back to Xoli. Xoli: "I also got you forms for UCT" Ntombi: "No, I don't want to go to Cape Town. I'm sure NMMU will accept me. My matric results are great, I'll apply as soon as possible." Xoli: "So you'll walk up and down to the police station to certify documents with a fresh wound?" Ntombi: "Yes", I smiled hoping she'd keep quiet. Xoli: "If you do too much too soon you might hurt yourself and risk having difficulties with your

future pregnancies" Ntombi:

"Don't you worry yourself about that. I don't have a womb so nothing to hurt". I hated the look of pity in her eyes. "Please don't say how sorry you are.

Please help me fill the forms in.

Do you think they will give me a loan should I not get a bursary?"

Xoli: "Uhm yeah. Your

grandparents don't work. You'll get it. So Ntombi it doesn't

bother you that you will never

have kids?" Ntombi: "I'm in pain and once I take my pills I'll sleep

soon after so I think it's best

that you go. Thanks for the

forms. Tomorrow I'll get to sending them with all supporting documents", I smiled. I don't want to talk about this anymore. I don't want to be asked questions that end up making me sad. I just want to forget. Xoli left me in peace and I was able to fill in the application forms. I've always wanted to be an Accountant. That is my first option and the second is Financial Management. Hopefully in a few months time I'll be a student at NMU. Tomorrow will be a busy day. From going to the police station, having the application

form scanned and sent and going to the bank to deposit the application money. I'll also have to go apply for the bursaries I saw online. Makhulu tried to convince me to wait a week saying we've only been back a few hours. If I'm not busy I'll think too much and if I think I'll end up going insane. I'll also go to the supermarket to ask for a job or try one of the fast food places in town for a job. I need to be busy until I register and start attending classes. I don't want to have a chance to think. On my free time I'll go run and do some

exercises on the soccer field. I'll also involve myself in church activities. I know that deep down Makhula is also angry at me and it's something I'll have a live with. I was about to search for more companies offering bursaries when I came upon an online article about Liyema and the boys. He finally gave them names. Was it up to me I'd have named each set of identical twins similar names and the others two as well. The article says how the proud father of four got the shock of his life when he heard the news. How he is grateful to

his surrogate whom he won't name for privacy reasons. I swiped past the article and went about finding bursaries for myself. Maybe a new life, in a new town where I don't know anyone will do me good.

THIRTY ONE

NTOMBI

The time for my dream of having a degree someday has come true. A month after I applied at Nelson Mandela University I received mail informing me that

I've been accepted to study Financial Management with them. I was disappointed that I was not accepted for my first choice but excited for having a foot in the door. Two of the bursaries I applied for rejected me because they prefer candidates who were fresh out of school. The student loan got approved but I no longer need its aid because the third bursary company are going to give me money for my studies. The bursary also included accommodation, travel and food cover. Things at home have been better because we had something

new to look forward to over the past few months of preparing for my studies. In a few years should all go well I'll be a graduate with a degree. Mrs B called one time to ask why I don't attend sessions with her therapist friend at the center anymore and I was forced to tell her the truth. After all that she has done for me I should have told her a long time ago but I feared judgment. She was sad to hear that I did it because Bonga threatened me with her and Zim's life. She said I should have told her and she would have helped me by all means

possible. I told her that going back and forth arguing about what I should and shouldn't have done is pointless. All that has happened is done and I have to move forward. She asked that I see the therapist again and I did but stopped when the lady constantly brought up the issue about the boys. I don't want to remember that time and don't want to be forced to relive it so I stopped therapy. It's been a busy couple of months leading to me going to school. I've been working my butt off at the supermarket and saving money for the first

couple of months at school so that Makhulu and Tamkhulu won't spend much. I intend on finding a part time job once I've settled in. I've lost the baby weight after weeks of hard sweating and I'm proud of myself. My belly still has the ugly stretch marks but I'll deal with that some other time. I have been wearing my old clothes and saving the clothes my father bought for me for when I'm at University because I saw how students dress when I went with Sindi and I don't want to be the odd one out. I've deleted all the social

media accounts that I have because I did not want to come across a picture of the boys through a mutual friend or something. I have not forgotten them and I love them still but I've found a way to manage. They turned five months a few days ago. I'm sure they are big boys. Tamkhulu has been telling me each and every single chance he gets of how proud he is of me. Xoli's brother, Radebe is the one who will be driving me, my grandparents and Xoli to Port Elizabeth. My father put in some money in my account and promised

to do so each month. He is still married to his wife and is very secret about what is happening between the two of them. I didn't get place at the University residences but fortunately my bursary covers off campus accommodations too. Xoli lives in a student house and managed to get me a room. Makhulu didn't like the idea of me being around Xoli too much because of Xoli's party ways. I assured her that I'm going to study and all I'll come back with a degree and nothing else. I've become such a grandparents girl that I feel

closer to them than my own father. Tata has been there as best as he can but I understand that he has his own family, one I can never be a part of. The drive to Port Elizabeth is filled with anxiety and excitement. I don't know what awaits me but I look forward to it. I'm in awe of my own resilience but I know I'm still able to move forward because God has been giving me the strength. I haven't stopped going to church, in fact I've been an active youth for the past three months. As soon as I've settled in, I'll go look for the nearest

Methodist Church. I'm even considering attending classes to be a Guilder. I've gained enough confidence to pray in front of the church too. I told people the story about my babies to kill all the different rumors. Most didn't quite understand but my issues soon became old news. After hours on the road we finally arrived at Port Elizabeth. I've never been here but Xoli has been telling me a lot about it. We arrived late on Saturday but fortunately Tankhulu's brother is here so we weren't worried about accommodation. We planned to go

sort out my accommodation tomorrow afternoon after church. The landlord was kind enough to agree on a meeting on Sunday. Its great to meet my extended family. I now have two grandfathers who look very alike but Tamkhulu is the last born in his family. Their house is in Motherwell. After the elders caught up and we washed the dinner dishes we called it a night because in a few hours we'd have to go to church. Xoli and I slept in a bed together. Xoli: "Hey, Ntombi why are you feeling so hot?", we both laughed. Ntombi: "Move

away from me" I pushed her away to create a gap between us. Xoli: "Where to? To the damn floor?" I laughed because that is exactly where she'll end up should she move further away. Ntombi: "Sorry, Friend. Don't worry tomorrow you'll be in your own bed" I turned to face her. Xoli: "Those beds in students houses can be so hard though damn. Anyway, are you ready to attend class soon?", she smiled. Ntombi: "Let me get registration done first then I'll take it from there. You know, Xoli there have been moments when I would feel a

deep void and suicidal thoughts would come to mind. I'm shocked I've made it so far. The church people judging me by saying I threw my kids away didn't help either" Xoli: Christians are the worst, friend. Look I think you let that man off too easily. The fact that you're talking about it now means you are getting better because a few months ago you'd just cry or insult me. This is a new year with new opportunities. Who knows once you're ready you might meet a kind man" she stuck her tongue out in a naughty way.

Ntombi: "I don't want a man", I

mumbled like a child who is sucking. "Did you manage to make Nana's dad pay maintenance?", she sighed loudly. Xoli: "I went to court and he cried bankruptcy. I don't know what that man thinks his daughter eats. She's starting school next year so it'll be more expensive but at least I'm graduating this year. By next year I'll have a job". She said with determination. Ntombi: "To independent women", I raised my hand to give her a high five. Xoli: "I'm not going to stop having boyfriends though so don't recruit me in this no boyfriend thing you

got going on.", our hands collided in a high five. Ntombi: "Okay only if you don't recruit me for parties. Deal?" Xoli: "Deal," we shook on it. "Ntombi, you'd have to borrow me a dress for the church business tomorrow. I only have mini skirts. I don't know if yours will fit now that you're looking so hot with your hour glass shape and curvy hips. If you have those maternity dresses with you, I'll take one", she joked and we laughed. Ntombi: "I have one that will great on you. I'll show it tomorrow," I promised. Xoli: "But have you seen yourself though?"

Like girl you're hot. You make it look like skinny jeans were invented specifically for you. I don't think you'll stay man-less for long," she said with a naughty smile. I've concluded that Xoli can't be alone. She has a few partners. Ntombi: "It's months of hard work. Those soccer players made me sweat, friend. You should join me for a run," Xoli: "A run to where?" she asked Ntombi: "A jog", I laughed. Xoli: "I only run when being chased, friend. I don't run for nothing. Do you know how long it takes to apply make up?", we both laughed. Ntombi: "You

don't need that," I cupped her face in my hands. She's a beautiful girl. Xoli: "Varsity makes you want to be beautiful. You'll see the slay queens Monday. You'll want me to put a weave and make up on you." Ntombi: "Let's sleep," I said to avoid her trying to talk me into putting in make up. I'm not against make up. I saw a lady on YouTube doing the natural look where she applied a little make up. If Xoli can teach me how to achieve that look I'd wear make up every now and then. I felt someone shake me and another pretending to cry.

Makhulu is waking Xoli and I and Xoli was not too happy. I can't believe it's morning already. We took a while to get out of the single bed we slept in. I gave her the dress and it fit like a glove. Soon everyone one was ready to go. Xoli and her brother aren't big on going to church but they went with us anyway. The service was great. There was a man who sang almost as nice as Liyema. I never told him that I've seen him in church before but it was not important information. We quickly went to eat lunch before meeting with the landlord. Tamkhulu's

brother and his wife have been great. I was ordered to not be a stranger and come visit when I'm hungry because they knew how difficult student life can be. I promised to visit as often as possible and plan on keeping my promise. We met with the landlord who showed us the house. It looks beautiful, clean and close to campus. I paid the deposit and one month rent and I'm officially a resident. Makhulu helped me unpack while Tamkhulu sat on the bed Tamkhulu: "Ntombi, I know last year was difficult but together we managed to get

through it all as a family. This is a new phase in your life, a good one. I've seen you get closer to God and doing His work at church. I've seen you get through days when you didn't feel like eating and bathing. I've seen you gym to be healthy. I've seen you wake up and go to work for money that was not much. I'm quiet but I've seen, my child. I'm proud of you," I turned to look at him. My gentle king. Ntombi: "I know I've broken your heart with the decisions I've made, Khulu. But not once did you become less of a parent, you too Makhulu. On my

worst days you were there and I won't disappoint you again. I promise," I said while wiping my tears with my hands. Makhulu: "I always thought I'm a strong woman but you give me a run for my money. I know you're still hurting but wow, my baby you've made progress. I wish that you didn't have to get through what you were forced to go through but I'm glad that when it did, it was when you were with us and not alone. We trust you. We don't doubt for a second that you'll do what you came here for and excel. We are concerned as any parents

of a young girl child in this cruel world would be but we pray. Our prayers will always protect you. You don't have to make us proud because proud is what we already are. On those bad days call us and we will pray together even if it's over the phone. I love you, baby," tears fell down her cheeks but she is smiling. Tamkhulu: "I saw a young man in one of the rooms. I showed him my fist so I'm confident he won't bother you," we all laughed. Ntombi: "I love you. You two are Mama's greatest gift to me," I smiled. I hugged Makhulu and Tamkhulu

joined in. They smelled like home and I'll miss being there. It was time for them to go after a while because Xoli's brother had to rest before going to work. I helped Makhulu on the back of the bakkie, kissed and hugged her one last time. I hugged Tamkhulu too while Xoli said goodbye to her brother. When their car was out of sight, I buried my face in my hands and cried softly. I felt safe with them but now I'm once again in a town I don't know and have no idea what will happen. I have Xoli but she's not my grandparents. My grandparents

are home to me. Xoli wrapped her arms around me and said she was the same when her family left. We went inside and unpacked the rest of our clothes. I met this guy Tamkhulu showed his fist to and his girlfriend. The four of us went to go buy some dinner. Xoli got a call and left us while we waited for the food. When we were outside ready to go, I got a call from Xoli telling us to come to the blue car parked in front of us. It was our landlord's car. I'm not sure if he is married but it seems there is more to his relationship with Xoli than landlord and tenant.

The tall, blue eyed, white gentleman dropped us off at our place and left with Xoli. I had a great time with my housemate and his girlfriend. The girl, Portia lives at the campus residence.

They look good together, so carefree and happy. After dinner I went to my room to watch movies on my phone. Fortunately our place has free wi-fi. I now have a good feeling about Port Elizabeth. All I dread are the long lines for registration tomorrow. LIYEMA Five months and one week. That's how old my boys are today. They have grown

so much, it is hard to believe that they were born before time.

Banele still gets his breathing difficulties but they have become less. The doctor says if he goes on like this soon he won't have this decease. The first couple of months of having them home was difficult. I hardly slept and could not find a balance between fatherhood and work. I knew if I continued like that I'd burn out so I found balance. They have two capable nannies and Ma Eunice has been staying with me again and helps me with night duties when the nannies are

home. It has not been easy but none of us pictures life without the boys. We are happy. They have reached plenty of milestones. My relationship with my father could not be better. He comes around the house to check on "the Elephant heirs" often. He's been inviting me to golf though I hate the sport but I've found new clients on the golf course. I'm exhausted most of the time but I'm not complaining. I introduced the boys to the church people two months ago. Most were shocked and did not understand why I had to go the surrogacy route,

especially the ladies who had an eye on me in the past. I have not seen nor heard from Zingisa so that's a good thing. I thought the few articles of me and the boys would attract her attention again. I've decided to go see someone to talk to about all my past pains. I did it because I want to be as healthy mentally and emotionally for my boys as I try to be physically. I read somewhere that you can go to gym and get healthy but if your mind is not healthy, you're still unhealthy. Its been a hectic Sunday and when I finally got the

chance to put up my feet up and relax there was a knock on the door. I ignored it hoping that the person would go away but the knocking became louder and I didn't want the boys waking up after we've just succeeded in making them sleep. I went to the door and when I opened stood a person I would never have guessed would come to my house. It's Mrs Bam from church. We don't go to the same congregation but I'm see her at big church gatherings. I greeted but she ignored it and let herself in. Mrs B: "So you brag about these

babies so that the entire Methodist community hears but not once did you tell them that you aren't the one who is supposed to take the credit". I closed the door and walked closer to her. Liyema: "I'm sorry, Ma but I don't quite understand what you're talking about" Mrs B: "You know what I'm talking about. For all these months since I've known I've had to stop myself from coming to you but I failed to tonight. You call yourself a Christian man but you keep the woman who gave you children away from her children hiding

behind this so called contract. Have you once since Ntombi went back home picked up the phone and just ask how she's doing? For all you know she could be dead after getting another infection from the operation, but then again Liyema has his boys so why should he care?" she said with a look of disgust. Liyema: "Ma, I..." Mrs B: "Shhh don't you dare interrupt me while I'm talking. I thought you were better than this, Liyema. I've seen you in church preach and sing like you can do no wrong and you fooled me into believing that you are a good

man. It's only when Ntombi told me what you did to her that I saw that you are nothing but a wolf in sheep skin. Do you know Ntombi's entire story? Do you know that she didn't want any of this? Well I'll tell you Ntombi's story," she walked closer and looked directly into my eyes. She began the story of a young Ntombi losing her mother only to be abused by her step mother for years. She told me how Ntombi ran away with a man to get away from her abusive step mother only to end up in an abusive relationship with this Bonga

character. She also told me how Ntombi got blackmailed into agreeing to being a surrogate. Mrs B laid it all on the table for me making sure I'm listening. When she was done talking she gracefully walked to the door and left. I didn't say a word. I didn't know that Ntombi has gone through so much. How does she and Mrs Bam even know each other? Why didn't she tell me that she didn't want any part of the surrogacy when we were alone? I could have used my experience in law to help her get rid of her abusive man. It

explains why she thought I was going to hit her that day at the hospital. To her all men must be abusers and with the way I've treated her I'm sure my name is top of the list of abusers in her mind. I sat back on the couch with a mind filled with a lot of things. It turns out she is not a crook after all. She had to be one to save the lives of those she loves. This new information has changed my perspective on Ntombi. I'm not sure what to do next. If she wants perhaps we could try the visitation rights Mma suggested. Maybe we can

plan that she sees them once a week and on their birthday? Mrs Bam walked out after she gave me a summery of Ntombi's past. She looked at me as though I'm the dirties thing she had ever come across. I'm it's not long before she tells her church friends what kind of man she thinks I am. Parts of me regrets doing this surrogacy thing all together but then I remember had it not been for that, I would not be a father today. My boys are the reason I'm breathing. They are the reason I stay healthy. They are the reason I work hard to

leave a legacy. They are my legacy. Had I gone with the stranger's eggs, I would not be in this situation but my boys would not be themselves. They are the way that they are partly because they have Ntombi's genes too. Bubele and Bukhosi look like her. We thought they looked like Lungile but it seems they only got his skin color but their features are Ntombi's. Bandile and Banele look like me but they got Ntombi's skin completion because I'm a bit darker than her. They are a beautiful mixture of us both. I've often wondered if they will accept

it explanation of how they were conceived and move on or will they go out and look for the woman who carried them and whose blood runs through their veins. Will they hate me for having conceived them the way that I did? When having a child was still just a dream, I thought I had it all figured out. Now that they are a reality things have changed. I've been asking myself a lot of "what ifs". My therapist said I'm scared to have Ntombi close because I still have concealed feelings for her. I disagree with him on that one. He assumes I'm afraid the

boys aren't the only ones who will love her but I will too should she be in our lives. Saying I'm afraid to love and be loved. I went upstairs and quietly went to check on the boys. They are sleeping peacefully, not a care in the world and I wish it could remain that way for as long as possible. What if making Ntombi a part of their lives brings harm their way? I'm not sure this Bonga character has stopped harassing Ntombi? Who could still lurk in the background waiting for who knows what. I can't take that risk, not with their lives. I

heard what Mrs Bam said and I'm disgusted that there are such men in the world but it's for that reason why I can't bring Ntombi close to them. Obsessive people don't fully let go. If he finds out that Ntombi cares for the boys, he might want to hurt her through them. It's too big of a risk. I'm sorry to Ntombi but I'm putting my children first.

THIRTY TWO
NTOMBI

I've been a student at the Nelson Mandela University for two months now. It's been two months of learning and adjusting. Xoli has taken me around town several times so I'd get used to moving around on my own. I've also learned that I'm not the introvert I thought I was. I guess being Bonga's prisoner for years made me think I stay home because I was an introvert. I know how the public transport system works and the times of the shuttle. The first two weeks I had difficulty getting used to being a student. I would get my

classes mixed up and end up being late or not attending at all. Mike, our housemate is a third year student in Financial Management and he's been a God sent. He helped me with all that I struggled with as far as our course is concerned. He put me in touch with a study group he formed in his second year. I've made two friends because Xoli and I hardly get to see each other. Between our different class schedules and her busy social life we've been living pass each other but we do have pizza dates at least once a week. Makhulu calls

every night before we go to bed to hear how my day went. My days are usually the same but she wants to hear about it anyway. We pray together over the phone too. I've been going to church and it feels good to be with people who don't know my story. They know the Ntombi they met a few weeks ago. I've been going to Tamkhulu's brother to visit as often as time allows me too. Life in a new town feel good. I can confidently say I'm happy. Amanda, one of the girls I consider a friend did not attend lectures today. I'm sure she's

with her SRC man. I walked a step ahead of Dudu who is my other friend. It seems her short legs can only take small steps. I'd occasionally wait for her to walk beside me. None of us are talking because we're exhausted. I've been attending classes since 8am. I have not had something to eat the entire day. All I had was an apple at noon. I'm not on diet, I just don't have an appetite.

"Ntombi, slow down," I heard Dudu say behind me. I looked back only to realize that I've been walking too fast or she is walking too slow. I waited until she stood

in front of me. Dudu is an introvert of note. She is that girl in class with earphones on when the lecturerer has not started his lesson yet to avoid talking to people. The two of us were forced to communicate when we had to work on a class assignment together. I guess she thought I'm not as bad as the rest. I don't talk much and I call before going over to her place. She appreciates that I respect her boundaries. I think it's safe to call her my best friend. We're different but we get each other. On my low days she does not try

to fill the space with useless words. All she does is sit with me in silence. She's a beautiful slender girl. With long relaxed hair. She's been talking about cutting it and growing it without chemicals after she saw my afro but has been stalling. We walked past a fast food restaurant and went inside to grab a bite because the hunger noise my tummy was making was embarrassing. After having our fill we walked around talking about anything under the sun. Dudu: "There is an open salon. I've decided that it's now or never," she said trying to sound

enthusiastic but I could hear she is nervous. Ntombi: "You don't sound too sure though," I raised both my brows. Dudu: "I've always been the girl with the long relaxed hair. I'm tired of having my scalp burnt with every salon visit. It's now or never," she said she crossed the road leaving me behind. I followed behind. The salon is empty so the hairdresser helped her immediately. Dudu sat in the chair and explained what she wants. The hairdresser untied her bun and checked her hair. Hairdresser: "I'm sorry, dear but you can't have a cut yet. You

don't have any growth," he said while rubbing her scalp with his fingers. Dudu: "Cut it all off," her words left both me and the guy doing her hair with mouths hanging. Ntombi: "No! I know you, you'll cry to me and make me send you ways to tie a doek to hide your bald head," we both laughed. Dudu: "I'm trying to live here. Girl, I'll rock that bald head to school tomorrow," Ntombi: You, miss I don't like attention? You'll hide it, not rock it. Sir, she'll grow growth, don't cut," the hairdresser looked at me as thought I've said the most

offensive word on earth.

Hairdresser: "Yhu who is this girl call me Diva Sir?", he asked his colleagues and we all laughed. I apologized to him in promise to call him by Dive. Dudu said she want all her hair cut and since its hers nothing I or all the hairdressers in the salon adviced. Dive first took scissors to cut Dudu's hair short. It seems his heart broke with each clip. Dudu covered her face with her hands. I don't know where the sudden bravery came from but I hope she won't regret it. At least I can tie a doek well, I'll teach her.

Next to me is a board with different cuts on it. A particular cut caught my eye. It was a faded cut with two lines on the side. I decided to also cut my hair. New town, new hair. I told one of the other staff at the salon that I want to cut and showed him a picture. He untied my two line plaits and was shocked to see that I want to get rid of such a big, healthy afro. They called both Dudu and I crazy and I guess crazy is what we want to be for a change. After a while we both finished and looked at each other. I've never seen a more beautiful

bald headed lady than Dudu. If it was up to me she wouldn't grow any hair ever again. She let out a low scream when she looked at me and said I look breathtaking. We both turned to look at our reflection properly and looked at each other with big smiles. Dudu: "Let's take a picture," she took her phone out of her bag. We took a selfie and asked one of the guys to take more pictures. We paid and the cool Port Elizabeth wind felt great on my freshly cut hair. I felt new. Dudu: "You're the first person I can call a friend, Ntombi. I've never had someone I can do

girly things with because I've always been without friends. Thank you," she smiled. Ntombi: "Thank you for being my friend too," I smiled. "Hug? I know you're not a fan," we both laughed. She came closer for a hug. Dudu: "Here comes that guy," she said while we hugged. I turned to look which guy she is talking about and it's Wandile. He seems to have a crush on me. I thought he would stop and talk but he walked past. I'm glad he did. Wandile: "Ntombi?!", he shouted looking confused. He didn't know if he should look at my face or my

hair. Ntombi: "Wandi," I faked a smile hoping he'd just greet and go. Wandi: "What happened to you? Where is your hair?," he walked closer to get a better look. Ntombi: "We tried something new," he looked at Dudu's bald head. "What do you think?", I asked. Wandi: "I'm still processing it. You looked so beautiful with your big hair. A true African Queen. And you, a bald head when winter is around the corner," he looked at Dudu. Dudu put her finger in her mouth pretending to puke. Dudu: "It's not going to make my brain freeze and chill its

just hair. We are still African Queens," Ntombi: "She is right, it's just hair. See you around," Wandi: "I'm sorry but I just was not expecting it. I even walked past you because I didn't know it's you. Can we go grab something to eat?" he smiled. Ntombi: "I've already ate. Look, Wandi I know you're trying to get me to go on a date with you but it's useless because I'm not looking for a relationship at the moment," I said feeling bad for turning him off but I want him to know where he stands with me. He nodded, said goodbye and

walked away. The next time I'm in a relationship it'll be with someone who I love and loves me back. I don't know if true love exists but if it does then I have not met it, not romantically. Dudu and I turned the streets of Port Elizabeth into a New York photoshoot and we are the models. Our hair will grow or we might decide to keep it short. I'm considering adding color to it. I'm young so I want to do the most while I can. We finally went home. I found Mike cooking dinner for himself and his girlfriend. He had a completely different reaction to

Wandi. He threw the words beautiful, hot and sexy around. I'm just happy his girlfriend has not arrived yet. He offered me a plate that I gladly accepted because cooking is the last thing on my mind. After dinner I went to bed feeling exhausted. I called Makhulu first because I wanted an early night. My alarm didn't go off the next day. Had it not been for Mike's usual noise while getting ready I wouldn't have made it in time for class. I took the quickest shower ever. After taking two slices of dry brown bread for breakfast I ran to my

shuttle stop. Thankfully I made it in time. I found Dudu waiting for me outside the door at varsity. She has a purple doek on her head and it didn't look too flattering with the pretty, knee length mustard dress she's wearing. Ntombi: "And then?," I asked while pointing to the badly wrapped head material on her head. Dudu: "Yesterday's confidence is gone, friend," she looked down. "I feel weird and if I rock up with a bald head everyone will look at me. I hate being looked at," she added. Ntombi: "Duduzile, you are a beautiful girl.

Please take it off. You know the other students don't have time to be looking at our heads. Please, take it off," she exhaled. After a few minutes of persuasion she finally took it off. We walked in and we both got plenty of compliments. Some saying Dudu was dumb to cut of her "natural weave". My friend walked to her seat with confidence. Amanda did not attend once again. If she goes on this way she might not pass her first year and possibly lose her bursary. Dudu's parents are paying for her cash. We have not talked about each others

families much. One thing we have in common is the fact that we take long to open up. We are both trying to figure out if the other is worth opening up to but I've got a great feeling about this friendship. We both go to church, different ones but still. We both don't drink nor smoke. We are dedicated to our studies. It makes sense to be friends with Dudu. I'm sure her parents are rich though so we come from different backgrounds. After class we went to sit outside in the sun. It seems our new looks attracted attention from men. Dudu's crush

complemented her and the smile it left on her face was heartwarming. A white car parked not so far from us. A lecturer went to greet the woman who stepped out of the car, I assume it's his wife. A baby's cry came from inside the car and Mr Barlet opened the backseat and took out the red faced crying bundle trying to calm her. The lady opened the other side and took out the other baby. It's two beautiful blonde haired baby girl twins. Daddy was trying to calm the other while mommy is distracting the other by pointing

at students walking by. My chest tightened while I looked at the happy family. The boys are now seven months and two weeks old. I can still feel their weight on my chest when the nurses allowed me to kangaroo care for them whenever Liyema was not at the hospital. I felt a slight shake but it feels as though I'm in my own world. My heart started to race at a rapid rate. My vision became blurry. I could feel the moistness in my palms. I try to breathe but it seems the more I try the less air my lungs get. I felt Dudu's hands slap my cheeks

gently. I couldn't respond because I'm putting all my energy in breathing again. It's like someone blocked the pipe connecting my lungs to my mouth and nose.

Dudu's desperate cries for help were so loud it felt like she's in my ear. Why can't I breath and see properly? I'm sure I'm going to die. I could hear a male voice begging me to take shallow breaths? I can't take deep nor shallow breaths. "Stand back, give her air. I think she's having a panic attack", a female voice shouted. My vision still blurry but I saw the many people around.

Am I going to die on campus.
Someone picked me up with ease
and they were moving with me.
What's going on and why won't it
end? Is dying such a prolonged
and scary process? Someone kept
begging me to breath, instructing
me on how to breath. I listened
this time around and I took the
shallow breaths they were
talking about. I almost breath
normally again and my vision
return. In front of me is a
paramedic in a red overall. He
smiled when he noticed I'm
making direct eye contact with
him. I've never been so happy to

see anyone in my life because I thought I'd gone blind. I'm in an ambulance. Dudu crying her eyes out sat next to me. I smiled to show her I'll be okay. My poor friend must have gotten the fright of her life. I was taken to the hospital because my heart wouldn't slow down and beat normally. They didn't keep me overnight. Dudu called Xoli who came with her man to pick me up. She and Dudu sat on the edge of my single bed. One of them brushing my leg for comfort. Dudu left promising to call when she's at her flat. Xoli laid next to me. I

told her what happened that triggered the panic attack because they said I had a panic attack. Her grip around me tightened but she had no words to comfort me. Ntombi: "I don't know what happened, Xolile. It felt like I was dying", I cried. Xoli: "Some people are mean, just mean. Should I call home?," she asked softly. Ntombi: "No, they will want me to go home. I don't want to be behind. Can you imagine the looks I'll get tomorrow?" Xoli: "Screw that. You're alive and that's all that matters. Maybe you should talk to someone. Maybe

that lady can hook you up with a therapist here," she said hopefully. Ntombi: "I stopped going because they want to talk about what happened. I want to forget," Xoli: "Maybe it's what you need to do, talk about it. You've been superwoman since it happened but after today life showed you that you're just human. You'll freak out whenever you see babies," she said. Ntombi: "I've seen plenty of babies since it happened and this has never happened. I think it's seeing babies born on the same day that triggers it" Xoli: "PE is filled with

twins, I've seen triplets too.

You're bound to see them.

Consider talking to someone

please," she pleaded. Ntombi: "I

just want to forget, Xoli. Please

just make me forget. Make me

forget how warm they felt on my

chest. Make me forget how proud

I felt of my boy when I felt him

breath again after he stopped.

Make me forget the feel of their

soft feet and hands. Make

m...me...me...m.me forget their

sc...scent..scent. Please make me

for...forget, friend," I stuttered

through tears. I turned to lay on

my belly and bury my face in my

pillow. This pillow has soaked up so many of my tears and so had the one at home and so has the one in Bonga's house. I pleaded with Xoli to make me forget though I knew she is not equipped with such power. I thought a fresh start in a new town would make me forget. I thought a haircut would make things feel new. But I was wrong and I shouldn't be surprised. How does one let go of a love that filled their heart?

THIRTY THREE

NTOMBI.

I've gone back to therapy which has forced me to speak about things I rather would work on forgetting. Being back made me realize that I'll never forget the pain of walking away from my only children. The pain of knowing that I'll never be pregnant again. Talking about it has helped somewhat. I've been having more lows than ups. Had it not been for Mike's extra lessons I'm sure I would have failed the first semester. Kate, my therapist recommended anti depressant treatment but I refused. I read

how it made some worse and I couldn't afford to feel worse. My outlets during my dark moments have been prayer and gym. I've become an actual gym member and it has been good. It helps me clear my mind and my body thanks me for keeping it in good shape. A few weeks after therapy I started to feel better. I've learned that it's okay to love and miss the boys even if they aren't technically mine by law. My friendships with Duda has gone from strength to strength. I found out she's an only child to successful business parents. I've

seen her mother on the news once or twice. I also found out that she already had a job waiting for her after she's completed her studies. She said she'd make a plan for me too but I'd rather earn my spot in a company by merit. Employment is hard to come by though so I didn't reject her offer just in case I might need help. Zim she her man finally fixed things a few months ago. We don't speak on a daily basis but I managed to get an invitation. I'm not sure how I feel about going back to Cape Town but Mrs B surprised me

with an unexpected plane ticket and reservations to a B&B close to her house. It'll be my first time on a plane. Well aside from being airlifted to Cape Town by Liyema but they doesn't count. The wedding is tomorrow and going to a happy event feels great. I'll finally let my hair down and dance. Not that I have much hair because I've decided to keep it short. Xoli helped me pack and it seems she's not going home for the June break. She made sure I have to right outfit and chose a nail polish color to match. She's also given me a few make up

lessons. I heard loud hooting and I knew my taxi is outside. Dudu said I should make sure I arrive at the airport early. I got into the taxi nervous because I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of the people at the airport. When I arrived I asked a kind looking stranger for help. After going through all processes I finally sat in my seat feelings relieved that I didn't get on the wrong plane. Is that even possible? A tall, slender man came walked in. He put a small bag in the little cabin above and sat right next to me. He smelled

devine. He wore a black jean and clean white shirt. He looked at his phone and grabbed the opportunity to look at his face. His skin looks so smooth, the color of honey. Not only does he smell good, he looks good too. I stared out the window to not stare until he asks what my problem is. Him: "Hi", he said but I didn't look at him because for all I know he is on his phone. I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turned to face him. "Hi," he smiled. He looked even more handsome. Ntombi: "Hello," I flashed a big nervous smile, too big of a smile. Him:

"Sonwabile Rhasi", he extended his hand. I took my now moist hand and shook his. Ntombi:

"Ntombikayise Poto," I felt awkward. Out of place all the sudden. Could I ask to be moved to another seat?, I wondered.

Soso: "I've never met such a beautiful Ntombikayise before," he said in his sweet yet manly voice. I blushed like a love sick teenager. "So are you going to Cape Town for business or pleasure, Yise?" he asked while pressing his phone. He pressed the side button of the mobile making the screen go black and

turned to look at me. I could not maintain eye contact for long.

Ntombi: "Uhm...I'm going to a wedding," I said softly. My cheeks felt warm. It's as though

someone held up a small fire on

both cheeks. Soso: "Oh wow, me

too. Well I'm going for work too

but yeah tomorrow I'll be at my

friend's wedding. Do you live in

Port Elizabeth?", he asked

Ntombi: "Port Elizabeth?," I

asked. I heard his questions yet

I had to reply awkwardly. Why is

this happening? He smiled. "Yeah

I do. Not forever. I'm here to

study. I live in Peddie. I mean I

live in Port Elizabeth yes, but I'm from Peddie," I could not stop rambling. I wish the earth could open and swallow me. "Uhm...and you?" I rubbed my sweaty palms on my jeans to dry. Soso: "Born and bred in Bisho. I work at Netcare Greenacres Hospital. I'm a pediatrician. I'm a healer of children", he joked and did his best superman pose. We both laughed. "What does the beautiful Miss Poti study?" he asked with a smile. Ntombi: "Well it's no where near as important as what you do. I'm a first year Financial Management student", he smiled

and nodded. Soso: "Is it too soon to ask you advice on some of my financial decision," he joked.

Ntombi: "Way too soon", I laughed "I could tell you where to spend a few rands on some good coffee though", he smiled. Soso: "Okay, okay for now I'll take that advice but only if you promise to have the coffee with me," he raised his right brow in such a sexy way. I felt an electrifying spark race from the bottom part of my bra right down to my feet. Ntombi: "I don't have time for coffee," he made a sad face leaving a smile on my face. Soso: "Please, I'm sure

somewhere between your lectures and group meetings you have a slot. How will you know you've give me the right advice on where to spend my few rands if you won't be there to listen to my feedback on how the coffe tastes," Ntombi: "I'll give you an answer when we land. This is my first flight and seeing that I'm far from the ground has me a bit nervous," I looked out the window again. I felt a strong grip around my hand. I looked down and saw the beautiful blend of chocolate and caramel our hands made. I looked at him and he gave me a

reassuring smile. Usually I'd get my hand back from a man but having his in mine made me feel less nervous about flying. Soso: "Are you a fan of winter weddings?", he asked casually as if he is not holding my hand in his when he knows nothing about me but my name and what I study. Ntombi: "I have not thought about it. I guess it works for Zweli and Zi..." Soso: "You're going to Zweli and Zimkhitha's wedding. Dr Zim?" I nodded. "Well shut the front door. I'm also going there. I know Zim. We met a few years ago. Wow!," he said with great

excitement. Ntombi: "It seems the world is indeed a small place," I said softly. Soso: "Is that a bad thing?" he looked at me. Ntombi: "It's both good and bad. It's a story for another day", I looked down breaking eye contact. Soso: "Please be my plus one or make me your plus one," he asked nicely. Ntombi: "I don't know, Sonwabile," I said in a whisper. One would swear the poor guy asked for marriage the way I'm going on. Soso: "I'm a great dancer and I've got some dry jokes," we both laughed. "Or are you a part of the bridal party and

have a partner?" Ntombi: "I'm not and I don't have a partner. I'm not a great dancer and I've got no jokes either," he laughed. Soso: "I've got plenty of both to cover us both. Please save me from the desperate ladies I have met at weddings who only go to find husbands," he placed his other hand over his face. His other hand still holding onto my sweaty one. Ntombi: "We might not even have matching outfits," I came up with a lame excuse. Soso: "My navy blue suit goes with pretty much any colour," he tried to convince me. Ntombi: "Okay, I'll

make you my plus one only because I'd hate to see you suffer in the hands these desperate women" I said and his smile became bigger. He is such a good looking man. We spoke about a lot of things during the flight. I even forgot I'm nervous. He sounds like such fun and his jokes are not all dry. Some made me laugh so loud that other passengers looked at us annoyed. When we arrived in Cape Town I finally let my hand out of his. My hand felt warm and not to mention wet and I imagine his was too. I thanked him for his company. We exchanged numbers

and a brief hug before parting ways. I can't remember the last time a man hugged me with meaning. It was short yet so comforting. Mrs B had already been waiting for me. She was so happy to see me and couldn't stop raving about how toned my body is. She told me that Zim wanted her to drop me off at a venue where Zim and her friends had a ladies only get together. I wanted to object but agreed to go because of didn't want to ruin Zim's night. Going shopping with Xoli was a good idea because I had an outfit for the party. By the

time I arrived at the venue the ladies were already tipsy. Zim came running towards me and gave me a long, long hug. We had not seen each other since I left her mother's home. Zim: "Ladies, this is my sister, Ntombi. She's come all the way from PE," she shouted. Her friends raised their glasses in greeting and soon offered me shooters. I asked for alcohol free champagne instead. Zim thanked me for coming and showered me with drunk kisses. The party was wild and I was having the time of my life. Soon there were strippers who were

not shy to take off all their clothing. I covered my eyes because of had not seen a penis in a long time. Zim and her friends are wild and naughty but they didn't make me feel pressured to doing things I didn't want to. After a few hours of crazy fun and dancing the transport dropped me off at the B&B. When I checked the time it was 4am but thankfully Zim is having an afternoon wedding. It seems the Cape Town weather will behave. It's a bit cold but the sun was out earlier on. My phone rang. I thought it was Makhulu but it

couldn't be, not at four in the morning. When I checked the screen Soso's name appeared. I picked up because I didn't feel sleepy. I answered but told him I can't talk for long because I needed sleep. It seems I didn't need too much sleep because we spoke over the phone for over an hour. He makes me laugh. I gave him the name of the place I'm staying in and he promised to be on time. I put a pillow over my face, usually it's because I wanted to silence the sounds of my late night cries so that Mike and Xoli wouldn't hear but not

tonight. Tonight I was trying to silence the screams of excitement after ending the call. Why is this man making me feel this way? The next day I texted Mrs B telling her she didn't have to worry about arranging a car to pick me up to go to the venue because I'll be riding with a friend. I don't know why I trusted a man I met just a few hours ago. For all I know he could be a serial killer. Are serial killers so good looking? I used the hours before the wedding to rest. I called Zim who was a nervous wreck and gave her well wishes.

I'm hoping that we can be friends again. Time went by quickly and I had to get ready for the beautiful celebration. After bathing I did my make up. Xoli ordered me to send her a picture and my teacher gave me a pass. I chose a mastered coloured dress with no sleeves. It covered my chest completely but had a very low V cut at the back. The open back was so low it didn't allow me to wear any underwear. I was afraid my butt crack would show but the dress fit just perfectly. It hugged my body tightly and showed off my curves just right.

Xolu said I shouldn't run out immediately when Sonwabile says he is outside because it would make me seem desperate. So when he called to say he is outside I sat on my bed for five minutes before heading out. I looked at myself in the mirror for one last time before taking my clutch. I found Soso leaning against a beautiful navy blue car, which matched his suit. The suit must have been custom made because it fit him like a glove making him look...sexy. He smiled and approached me when he saw me. He scanned me from head to toe

making me feel shy. Soso: "You look beautiful," he smiled bend his elbow. I thanked him before putting my arm in his. He opened the door for me. Liyema has done that a few times but that was because he didn't want me to take strain after fertility treatments. Soso is doing it because he is a gentleman. Well I hope so anyway. He went over to his side, got in and drove off. He complimented me again and again on unexpected moments during our conversation. If he carried on I feared my underarms might sweat because the car suddenly

felt too hot thought there was a cool breeze in Cape Town. We arrived at the wedding venue at an estate in the Cape Winelands. Wow, Zim and Zweli must have spent a lot of money to hire this place. Sonwabile came over to my side to open the door for me. There were a few cars parked already. We made our way to the chapel and chose to sit in the second row seats. We wanted to see everything. Soon guests flooded in. Mrs B wore a beautiful two piece suit paired with a big hat. She hugged me and greeted Soso. She gave me that "later I

want to hear everything" look. Soso and I spoke about the decor and other things. He apparently wants a rural white wedding where everyone is invited to attend. He kept asking what I picture my wedding would be like. "I have not thought of that", was the answer I gave. I looked back to see if the bridal party has not lined up at the entrance yet, instead I saw Liyema's face. He was avoiding eye contact. He cleared his throat and looked straight ahead. I decided not to allow him to ruin my day. I turned my attention to my date again.

The groom and his groomsmen came in and stood in their positions. Soon the music started and the bridesmaids walked in. They looked beautiful. The music changed and Zim walked in with an elderly man, maybe it's her uncle. Had it been me I'd have preferred my mother to walk me down the aisle. She wore a white ball like wedding dress and had the longest veil. Everyone stood when she made her way down the aisle. Mrs B was crying already. Sonwabile looked at me with such kind eyes and smiled before turning his head to look at Zim

again. My hand was in his again and his thumb brushed the top of my hand gently. I looked up to check the back of his head. He has a tattoo or a birthmark on his back that showed a bit on top. It looked like a birthmark. My attention should have been on Zim yet it was not. He turned to look at me again and found me starrng. i quickly looked at the bride hoping he won't ask why I was starrng. The ceremony started, the couple exchanged vows and were husband and wife. I'm happy for them because I know the wedding almost didn't

happen. Both Soso and I got invited with close family and friends to take pictures with the couple. Soso did the craziest and random things which made me laugh. I'm sure my mouth is wide open due to laughing too much in all the pictures we're in together. Zim came to greet her friend and I guess colleagues since they are both doctors. She confessed to planning on hooking me up with Soso and was happy to see we didn't need help. We went to the reception area to welcome the newlyweds. They did their entrance dance and it was fun.

Soso also made a speech and gave well wishes to the couple. When the food got served it seems my date only cared about feeding me because he fed me food from his plate even though I had mine in front of me. No man has fed me. Bonga has but only because he hit me so hard the previous night that my hands couldn't move. Time for the dancing came and my date was not as good at dancing as he thinks but he fight care. It seems Soso lives life to the fullest. I can't dance either but his "dance like no one's watching" rubbed off on me. The DJ played

a slow dance love song. Soso opened both his arms. I stood closer to him. So close I could feel his warm breath on my face. I felt his hands on the bare curve of my back. His touch sent shivers down my body. So much so that goosebumps formed on my arms. He thought I'm cold but I assured him I'm okay. I couldn't exactly tell him it's because of him. I didn't know where to place my hands. He took my arms and put them on his shoulder. I instinctively wrapped my arms around his neck. We moved left and right with the rhythm of the

song. There was not much either of us could do but other couples did the same so we weren't embarrassing ourselves. He lowered his head and his forehead kissed mine. For a moment I thought he was going to kiss me but he didn't. He just looked at me and smiled. The feel of him so close made parts of me get hot and I imagine some wet. Soso: "I like this," he said in a whisper. Ntombi: "I like it too," I said and couldn't believe those words escaped my mouth after months of swearing off men. He hugged me. Shouldn't I be stopping this?

Why does it feel so good? I could feel the warmth of his skin and I could feel the bulge in his pants which surprisingly didn't care me away. The danced in the dim lit dance floor and I didn't want it to end. We more like hugged danced. I caught Zim looking at us and making a thumbs up and heart signed. We would occasionally turned just so it would look like we're actually dancing. I saw Liyema sitting at a distance table. He was starring but looked away as soon as he saw I'm looking at him. I fight care about him. Tonight he didn't matter. It

was all about Zim, her husband and the man holding me. A man who was a stranger that felt familiar. We made our way outside. It was cold but Sonwabile gave me his jacket. The estate looked more beautiful at night with the lights on. We sat on a bench in silence when I felt Soso's arm around my shoulder. Suddenly a young waitress came holding two cups of hot coffee. I looked at Soso confused. We thanked the young lady and she walked away. Soso: "Since you have not given me an answer about having coffee with me

after our flight as you said, I thought I'd take today as an opportunity to share a coffee with you," he took a sip of his coffee but it was too hot which burnt his poor lips. Worried sick I offered to take a look at his lip. One would sweae he got burnt by a live fire the way I was concerned. I thought since I haven't drank my coffee is we sat in the cold. My cool lips would aid his burnt ones. I think it was just an impulsive excuse to kiss him. I had my lips on his before he could say anything. His lips were warm against my cold ones.

I peeled my lips from his and felt so exposed. Who kisses a man she met just yesterday? He tried to make the mood less awkward by saying his lips felt better. I felt like dying a thousand deaths. When I stood to walk away he stopped me. His lips landed on mine once again but this time with intention. I responded to his kiss. It felt like I had been kissed incorrectly all these years. Soso was in no rush. His breath did not reek of alcohol and tobacco. I stopped the kiss and my warm tears soon flew down my cheeks. He looked concerned.

His thumbs wiped my tears off. I felt pathetic. I gave him his jacket and like a dramatic girl in a movie scene ran away. I went to tell Mrs B I'm leaving and luckily the newlyweds had left already. When I arrived at the B&B I got a chance to cry. What was I thinking? Men are all the same or at least the ones I meet. They start off sweet and then change. Bonga and Liyema were like that. I'm sure Soso wanted to sleep with me and that's it. My phone rang and beeped for half the night until I switched it off. I was not going to be a one night

stand to a man pretending to be kind. I'm sure if I didn't have sex with him, which I wouldn't he'd grow me out first thing in the morning like used good. I'm not a fool anymore.

THIRTY FOUR

LIYEMA

I personally did not enjoy Mrs Bam's daughter's wedding celebration. I wish I had not allowed Vusi to convince me to be his plus one. I'm sure people thought we were a gay couple.

Between Mrs Bam's cold stares whenever her eye caught mine and seeing Ntombi it was difficult to enjoy. I could not keep my eyes off Ntombi and her new boyfriend could not keep his hands off her. Who could blame him? She looked beautiful. The way she lost all the baby weight is remarkable. I don't know why but I felt sick whenever her man put her hands on her, especially when he placed his hands on the small of her bare back while dancing. There were occasions he touched her perfectly shaped behind and those were the moments that made me want

to get up and leave. On the bright side of the bad day we managed to make new business contacts. That was the only highlight to that day. When I arrived I found the boys sleeping already after giving their nanny a hard time and perhaps even a few grey hairs. After the bad experience at the wedding just looking at them made everything else seem small. They have grown to become quite the adventurers. If crawling was an Olympic sport, my boys would all have gotten gold medals. They seem to find the smallest of objects in the

oddest places too so I had to baby proof the house. They are also walking with the assistance of furniture. They can wave goodbye when a person leaves and have been trying to utter a few words but they aren't there yet. In a few months they are sure to say a few words and walk on their own. To be present while they had their milestones has been a blessing and I look for to more. Banele has not had a breathtaking episode in a while now, in fact it has been weeks. I'm hoping in the next appointment the doctor will say

he has outgrown it. They have stolen the hearts of my employees and my church people. Soon they will be turning a year old. After seeing Ntombi at the wedding, I decided to allow her to see them should she still want to. I have not thought about how she will fit in our lives but I think having her in their lives will help them too. Vusi claims I want her in their life so she could be closer to me. That seeing her with another man made me realize that I still have feelings for her. After a while of denying it I finally accepted it. I've got feelings for

Ntombikayise Poti and I don't know what to do with them. She has moved on and seemed truly happy. I can't break her up with her man only to risk hurting her. Will she even accept my status? Will she ever be able to forgive me for keeping the boys away from her? I think it is best I keep my feelings to myself and let her see the boys. I think she can visit whenever she can because after asking around, I found that she is a student in NMU. I'm proud of her for trying to better her life. It seems I had the right picture of the woman she is before I

found out about them conning me. I feel like crap for painting her as a selfish thug. Perhaps she could come to Cape Town for a few days each time she is on school break to see the boys. Will that be enough for her? I've been in touch with her grandfather. I got his number from the hospital after asking one of the staff nicely. It seems the old man wants me to pay damages for his daughter. I will get to that when I've spoken to Ntombi. Mr Mlandu suggested I talk to her when she is back in Port Elizabeth. He call led to inform me

that she had gone back and I booked a flight for today that same day. I'm sure being secretly in touch with me is difficult for Mr Mlandu but I assured him my aim is not to hurt his child. I'm hoping she and I can sit down and just talk. Perhaps work out a solution to our situation. I'm not taking the boys with yet because I fear overwhelming her. They will be at my parent's house until I'm back. I've been to Port Elizabeth a number of times for both business and pleasure but I'm not sure what to label this trip as. Is it business or

pleasure? After dropping the boys off at the excited grandparents house I made my way to the airport. My parents have not stayed a day or two alone with the boys since they have become mobile. I'm sure after this they won't ever want to. They are a joy but an exhausting one sometimes. Ntombi lives in a student house in Humewood. I'm familiar with the suburb so I should not get lost. When I arrived in PE I hired a car for two days. I can't stay long so I hope Ntombi will be welcoming after a while. The sun is already

starting to set but it was not dark yet. The wind blew cold and it was in moments like these that I thought of the homeless. I drove around for what seemed like forever unable to find the house. I saw three young men approach. I think they might be students. By some luck they might even know Ntombi. I parked the car by the side of the road and crossed the street to get to them. They seemed friendly at first but I soon felt a fist blow right in my gut. It was an ambush. I fought back but the youngsters were too strong.

I lying on the tar road before I knew it. They kicked and punched me. I heard a female voice shout for help. It must have startled my attackers because they searched my pockets, found my cellphone in one and ran off. The lady came running to me after they ran off. I could see her drop her bag to run to me faster.

"Are you okay?" she helped me sit up. I think they broke a rib because my side was hurting bad. "You're bleeding", she added. She wanted to touch my face which I guess was the part that is bleeding.

"Don't touch the blood please", I managed to say.

"Let's go to my place, for all we know they went to get the other. Can you stand?", she held my arm trying to help me up.

"I'll manage thanks," I got up.

I told her that I'm parked cross the road. She insisted that I go to her place so she could check my wounds out since I didn't want to go to a hospital. I gave in and decided to go with her. She went back to pick her bag up. I asked her what she was doing alone at night when there are robbers

around. She told me she has just gotten off a taxi from varsity. She claimed those might be students who took a chance because their neighborhood is usually safe. She directed me to her place. I'm just glad that it was me they mugged and not her because they might have done far worse to her. My forehead has a small cut that bled out too much for its size. I could not let her touch me without rubber gloves on. The last thing I want is to infect someone who helped me out of a bad situation. She introduced herself as Xolile. She spoke so

much she did not even bother to know my name. I had to ask her where to turn on numerous occasions because she'd forget to direct me. She finally told me to park at a white and red painted house. I pulled my car into the driveway and followed behind her to the front door. She unlocked the burglar gate and we went inside. It was quiet inside. A young man was busy cooking. Xoli told him my story and he apologized for my misfortune as though he was responsible. I heard a door down the passage open and close. Xoli said it's their

other house mate. She excused herself to go get the first aid kit. My rib is sore but it seems it is not broken. Mike excused himself too. I figure the awkward silence must have been too much for him because it was for me. When he disappeared into the passage I was relieved. Xoli shouted that she will be with me soon from another room. Her voice is loud so I heard her clearly. Someone is walking down the passage dragging their feet. The sound annoyed the hell out of me.

Ntombi used to do that when she wore slippers but I never told her

it works on my nerve. Speaking of Ntombi I have to ask Xoli if she knows her by any chance. A girl walked into the kitchen where I sat. I could not get a look at her face because she was rubbing it with her hands. I'm guessing she has just woken up.

Liyema: "Hi." I said to let her know she had company. She looked at me and I realized it's Ntombi. She screamed before disappearing down the passage in a rush. I guess between the bloody face and shock of having a strange man in her house she did not see it's me. She, Xoli and Mike soon

appeared. She got a chance to look at me properly.

Ntombi: "Liyema?" she said while walking closely. "You're bleeding," she pointed out the obvious and tried to touch my face,

Liyema: "I'm okay, please don't touch the blood", I warned.

Ntombi: "I just want to see how bad it is," she raised her hands to my face. I held them, stopping them from touching.

Liyema: "Dammit, Ntombi, I said don't touch the damn blood please," I said in frustration.

She lowered her arms and I hated for snapping at her but I can't allow her to touch my blood. Xoli asked if I'm "thee Liyema" and Ntombi nodded. That was where Xoli's hospitality stopped. She gave me an earful about the type of man I am for hurting her friend before dramatically walking away. Mike gave us some privacy too. Ntombi took the first aid kit, put purple rubber gloves on and walked closer to check on my wound. She did not say anything after I snapped at her. I apologized but she still gave me the silent treatment while

attending to my cut. When she was done she asked me to leave. I pleaded like never before for her to hear me out first. After a while she told me to follow her so we could talk privately. We went down the passage and into one of the bedrooms. I closed the door behind us.

Ntombi: "It's a mess in here. I've just arrived," she lied not knowing that I know she arrived a few days ago but I did not mind the mess. "You can sit on the bed if you like," she pointed at the undid bed. I lowered myself into the

hard single bed. I remember these beds from my student days. Liyema: "Thanks. How are you?", she sat next to me. The short pajama short she had on went up her thigh more revealing her smooth chocolate thighs. She grabbed the duvet and covered her legs with it.

Ntombi: "Why are you here? I'm sure it's not to ask how I am," she said in a cold tone and I deserved it.

Liyema: "I've come to talk to you about the boys," she turned her body so it would face me.

Ntombi: "Is something wrong? Are they sick?", she asked in panic. I shook my head.

Liyema: "No, they are well, all of them. The only people who will be sick are my parents after spending time with them alone," I laughed softly but she looked at me like I'm crazy. "Uhm, I've come so we could talk about a way forward that will work for the six of us," I said while looking at her.

Ntombi: "Why now?" she asked a valid question. Why now?

Liyema: "I realized how important a mother is to children," she raised her brow.

Ntombi: "You mister "she is not their mother, she just rented her womb," she said with an attitude.

Liyema: "What? I never said you rented your womb," I stood from the bed.

Ntombi: "You might as well have said it. Now you go 'oh they need their mother' after you kept them away from me eleven months. Why now? Are you dying?" she came to stand in front of me.

Liyema: "And what makes you think I'd have left them in you...", I stopped myself from finishing the sentence. "Look, Ntombi, I don't want a fight. I just want to talk to you like two civilized adults," I added.

Ntombi: "NO! Continue, Liyema. Why would you leave them with me when I'm not their mother, right? That was what you were going to say," she pointed at me. I had to take a deep breath because one of us had to keep their cool and I was not expecting her to because she is in full right to be angry.

Liyema: "Please let us talk about this tomorrow. I'll still be in PE. I have not booked into a B&B yet but once I have I'll send you the details and we could perhaps talk there. Are you still using the number you were using?" she just gave me a death stare. If looks could kill I'd be buried by now.

Ntombi: "How did you know I'm in PE? In fact how did you know you'd find me at this house?", she stood closer to me. "You want something from me and I want to know what that is", she added.

Liyema: "Only your time and ears because I need to talk to you" I

said calmly. She did not reply. "I'm assuming you are still using your old number. I'll call you or rather text you because something tell me you won't answer my call. I'll text you the details of where I'll be so we can meet. If you want me to come get you then please say so. They took the phone I use for personal use but this is the number of my work cellphone. Please tell me if you will come or not," I left my business card on her bed.

I was about to leave when she told me that she won't meet me at my terms. She said she'd be

the one to choose a place to meet and the time. Saying that she will text me the details and not the other way around. I told her I'm good either way. I thanked her for tending to my cut and said goodnight. I wanted to thank Xoli for her help once again but she gave a mean look, went into Ntombi's room and shut the door. Mike walked me out to my car. At least someone cared somewhat but Ntombi's response did not shock me. I expected worse but she at least allowed me to sit down and talk. I'm hoping to see a text message from her tonight

or tomorrow morning. She might not want to see me but I'm sure she wants to see the boys. She loves them, perhaps even way more than I do. I was not going to open a case of cellphone theft because I know I won't find my phone and those boys might not even be from the neighborhood. It was dark and I could not see them properly. It'll be a cold case. I booked into a B&B and settled in. I video called Mma and she already wanted me to come home. I told them the boys are too much sometimes but they insisted with them they will tone down

the energy more, now look at them. I laughed when she said Ta locked himself in the study for a minute or two to get some time to rest. They do that to a person but unfortunately I can't go hide from them. I miss them. Mma managed to get them all to stand in front of the phone's screen. They were intrigued by seeing me on a screen. The screams that came from that phone session were crazy. Soon they cried. I guess they miss me too. I talked to them like adults and made conversation until they calmed down. Soon the five of us were

having a proper conversation but I do not understand a single word they say. Something else caught their attention and Mma said Furry, her cat had just walked in. they crawled after him in a chase, poor cat. I said goodnight and ended the call. I checked my text message and there was not a single one from Ntombi. I guess she needed more time. Tomorrow is another day.

NTOMBI

Liyema is rude when he gets a chance to be. The way he told me not to touch him was uncalled for. I was not going to touch the cut.

I don't know what he wants from me but he said it's the boys. My mind went into over thinking coming up with different scenarios in my head. I know the only way to know why he wants to see me is if I agree to see him. I have not seen Soso since the wedding. I don't know if I miss him or the attention he gave me. He stopped calling me so I guess he has given up on me. Xoli told me to not go see Liyema because he might upset me to a point of another panic attack. She had a point but if it has something to do with Bandile, Bukhosi, Bubele and

Banele I want to hear what he has to say. When I saw him sitting in our kitchen I thought someone had broken in. I thought we were going to die. I tend to be a bit dramatic. I sent Liyema a text telling him that we will meet at my place at 3pm. I must admit his being mugged not so far from our place made me afraid Liyema is a tall and well built man so if these boys could take him on, we are nothing. I hope he went to the police to open a case of theft and assault. My phone beeped. It was a

message from Liyema telling me he will be on time.

Waking up early during winter time is no fun. Just putting a foot out of the covers is torture and me sleeping in shorts did not help much when I had to wake up. I found Liyema starrng at my legs yesterday. I'm sure he saw my stretch marks on the awkward places on my thigh. It's Saturday and I don't really have plans for the day. I've been thinking about Sonwabile since this morning. I think I miss him. I still have not forgotten how good of a kisser he is. I decided to

call him but it went straight to voicemail. I decided to be bold and go to the hospital he works at and if luck was on my side I'd find him. I got dressed warmly and made my way to Greenacres by taxi. I made a stop at my favourite coffee joint at the mall first and got two take away coffees. I hope he enjoys the coffee as much as I do. Since we could not finish our coffees at Zim's wedding, I thought we could thus time. I nervously went to the reception area and told her who I'm looking for, she directed me to the paediatric side of the

hospital. They called him for me and he looked so surprised to see me. We both were not sure if we should hug or not. I told him that I've come with coffee and thought he would turn me away but instead he smiled. He accepted the coffee but said his shift will only end in thirty minutes but asked me to stay. I agreed to stay. He went back to work and I sat down sipping on my coffee. 30 minutes felt like an hour. He finally came out after 45 minutes apologizing for letting me wait. We went out and I suggested we go eat but he

asked to speak to me privately. I knew he wanted to ask why I reacted the way I did that night. We sat in his car instead.

Soso: "You were the last person I expected to see today. How have you been?" he smiled.

Ntombi: "Good thanks and you?" I brushed the sides of my arms with my hands.

Soso: "You cold?" he reached forward and put the heater on. It was warm soon after. "I'm good too. Uhm...I think we need to talk about the elephant in the room first. We were having a

great time, we shared a great kiss and then you just disappear on me. You have not been taking my calls and now you are here. I'm happy to see you but I'm lost," he added.

Ntombi: "I understand and I'm sorry about running off like that. I was just all over the place that time. I did not expect the kiss. I know I kissed you first but it still came as a shock," I tried to explain as best as possible.

Soso: "Okay, I hear you. I like you, Ntombi and I'd like to see where this takes us," he said while looking ahead.

Ntombi: "If getting to know each other means no sex would you still want to try?" I asked impulsively. He turned his head to look at me and I could see he is taken aback by my question but I wanted him to know what he would be getting himself in to.

Soso: "For the first few months? Like this 90 day rule you girls have going thing?", he asked softly.

Ntombi: "I mean no sex for the entire time of our relationship. I'm celibate," his eyes widened.

Soso: "Whoah I...mmm...I don't know. Honestly that would be a problem. Not that I want to be with you for the sex, no but to me sex is important in a relationship," he stuttered. I won't pretend as if his answer was not a let down. I looked out the window and back at him.

Ntombi: "Then I don't think it will be a good idea for us to try to get to know each other," I said with a forced smile.

Soso: "I'm sorry, Ntombi but I had to be honest with you. I'd go crazy if I could not touch my

woman sexually," he explained himself.

Ntombo: "It's really okay, Soso and I respect that you are honest. Not everyone we meet are meant to stay in our loves.," I smiled. He took my hand and kissed it.

Soso: "I hope that you managed to sort what bothered you that day out. A beautiful lady like you does not deserve to cry. I really, really hoped that we could take this further and see where it leads but we want different things,"

Ntombi: "And that's okay," I have a genuine smile.

I planted a soft kiss on his lips one last time. I missed them actually. There is a spark between us but I can't force him into a no sex relationship. He looked me in the eye for the longest time, such a charmer. I smiled, opened the door and stepped out. It has started to rain. I waved at him and ran for cover. I decided to catch a movie while waiting for the rain to pass. I bought a big bowl of popcorn, chocolate and fizzy drink. I was not heart broken but

disappointed. I enjoyed the movie because I laughed like a mad person until it ended. I watched another when the first was finished. When I walked out of the mall the rain was falling harder than when I went in. I checked the time, it is 3:30pm. I'm late for my meeting with Liyema. I stepped into a taxi and waited for 15 more minutes before it got full. The taxi dropped me off at my stop and I had to run home. I put my phone in my bra just in case those thugs returned. I found a car in the driveway and Liyema was inside it.

I was an hour late for our meeting yet he waited. I invited him inside and excused myself to get out of the wet clothes. I put on my warmest pajamas and winter gown before joining him. I made him coffee. We had the cheap stuff and I was surprised he drank it. We were alone at the house. I put the heater on just for extra warmth. He was patient with me for a change. We walked to the lounge.

Liyema: "Would you please stop doing that?" I looked up at him. I kept quiet waiting for him to tell me what I should stop doing

when all I was doing was walk. "I mean dragging your feet like that. You did it at home too. Why can't you lift your feet when walking in slippers?" he added. The nerve of this man.

Ntombi: "I won't stop doing it because it is comfortable. And if it bothered you so much back then why didn't you say anything?" he shook his head. "I will not stop", I added while dragging my feet with intention until I reached a chair and sat down.

Liyema: "So stubborn," he mumbled. He sat down beside me.

I could not wait for him to leave my place.

Ntombi: "Are you happy with the way I'm sitting?", I asked sarcastically.

Liyema: "Aside from the big bubble your pj is making in the front I'm happy," I looked at my pajama pants. It indeed formed an awkward bubble making it look like I'm wearing a diaper. I bought it when I was still pregnant that's why. I covered it with my gown before giving him a push. How dare he? He smiled and apologized.

Ntombi: "Say what you wanted to so you can go be nasty to someone else," I sulked.

Liyema: "I'm sorry. Okay here goes. After giving it some long thought. I finally decided that it's best that I grant you access to the boys?", I tried to hide my excitement.

Ntombi: "Why now?", I asked.

Liyema: "Now I know that you are not just some thug's girlfriend. Mrs Bam explained why you did it. How if you weren't forced, you would not have done it. Also it was cruel of me to keep

you away from the only children you will ever have," he said sincerely.

Ntombi: "It was very cruel of you to do so. I have shown you many times how much I love them, Liyema but you are just so cold. Now when I've finally accepted that they will never be in my life you waltz in and tell me that I can. How will I fit in now? Will I be that aunt who comes with gifts on their birthday?" he turned to face me. I frowned even more. It's me being dramatic.

Liyema: "That's why I'm here, Ntombi. I want to hear from you how you would like to be involved," I broke eye contact. How do I want to be involved?

Ntombi: "You are doing this now because you know I won't be able to see them on a daily basis due to school," I said.

Liyema: "Oh for fuc..." he cut himself short and looked at me. "Ntombi, if you want to fly to Cape Town everyday to see them it's fine. I don't care. I just know that there are moments when they cry uncontrollably, and sometimes not I, my family nor

their nannies can calm them down and in those moments I wonder if they are not missing you. They know your touch and scent. For all I know they might miss it even after all these months. They can't talk but it makes me wonder if you were there would they keep quiet once they felt you hold them," he said softly. I looked down.

Ntobmi: "Do you think they miss me?", he lifted his shoulders up. "I miss them," I said in a whisper.

Liyema: "I know and I'm sorry." he said softly.

He looked up again. He had a look of tenderness in his eyes and I could see he meant what he said. I don't know how I want to be involved their lives. I always fantasized of being a full time mother to them but reality is I can't. I have to finish school so that I can help provide for them. Will occasional visits be enough? Will Liyema allow them to call me Mama? I've missed out on so much already. Liyema told me what they can do by now. He showed me a video where he waved goodbye to them before he came here. They all waved. Well in

their own imperfect way. He did not have photos of them on the cellphone he had since its for business but I could see from the one videos how much they have grown. He asked if I want to give it a go. Is that a trick question? Of course I wanted to try even if I feel terrified. I'm still angry at him for not coming to his senses sooner. He raised his concerns about Bonga and I told him I have not had contact with him since moving from Cape Town. Hearing that seemed to put his mind at ease and I don't blame him. We agreed to me going to

Cape Town next weekend. I can't over the week because I have a big group assignment and will be in group meetings all week and I'm group leader so I have to attend. He offered to pay for my ticket and I did not reject his offer because I'm rather broke at the moment. I don't think either of us know how this will work but it'll come to us as time goes by. He said he's taking a flight back later tonight because he has an important meeting the next day. He surprisingly asked about Soso because he said he was not ready for boyfriends to be

introduced to the boys. I told him to not worry because I don't have a boyfriend. If I did not know better I would have thought it was a look of relief and perhaps even a smile I saw when I told him I'm single but I know better. I'm sure he is doing this because a part of him pities me but its okay. I'll see my boys and that is all that counts. I'll have to ask Tata for some money to buy them something. I'm sure they already have everything but still, I can't rock up empty handed. I can't wait for the next weekend.

THIRTY FIVE

NTOMBI

It's only by grace that I managed to deliver the presentation on earlier on because my mind is already in Cape Town. Makhulu was the first person I told and she was worried at first but soon became just as excited. I didn't tell Mrs B I'll be in Cape Town. I didn't want to hear how badly this could turn out if I go alone without legal advice. I know her, she'll want to be there when Liyena introduces me to the kids.

I appreciate her but I have decided to go on this journey alone. I want to soak up each moment I get to spend with them just in case Liyema changes his mind. Him changing his mind is something that I fear will happen. I've been painting mental pictures on how I'll be when I see them. I've been trying to not get too excited but I failed. I'm excited and everyone who cared to ask knew why I'm excited. Most were shocked to learn I'm a mom. Am I a mom? What is a mom? Does giving birth qualify a woman to be a mom? What about the

woman who gave birth but decided to abuse their children, are they moms? What about those who never gave birth but took in another woman's baby, are they moms? I feel like there is more to being a mother than just giving life to them. Whatever a mother is defined as, I want to fit the description in every way possible. I bought them medium sized cars from the R5 Chinese shop. Tata could not send me money and I understood. Each car cost me R15. Liyema asked that I not buy small ones because they swallow almost

every they can find lately. I chose the color red for all of them. I didn't want one to cry over the others car because they are a different color. The cars were the first things I packed. Even if I forget my clothes, I didn't want to forget their gifts. Xoli accompanied me to the airport. When the plane lifted off the ground my nerves kicked in because it was not going to be a long flight. The flight felt long. It felt as if I was going to another planet or something. I arrived safely and found Liyema waiting for me as he promised he

would. He has been kind and patient. I've realized that he was not a patient man and I think I tested his patience a bit too much at times. After an awkward greeting, we didn't speak much. I didn't want to speak because I was nervousm one would swear I'm going to meet four difficult men rather than babies. Liyema put on his gospel and I was thankful because the silence was becoming awkward. He is now driving a seven seater SUV. At the back are four identical car seats. I wonder if each baby sat on the

same seat each time they took a ride? I wanted to ask him but thought he might think it's a stupid question. I feel bad because he had to pay for my flight. I'm sure the boys are not cheap to raise. Next time I'll sort out my own ticket. We pulled into the driveway of his house. "Hey relax, their just babies", he said before going out of the car. He must have noticed how terrified I am. I stepped out of the car and followed behind him. I asked to get something from a bag in the boot. I opened the suitcase, took out the cars and placed them

in my handbag. His house has not changed much. There were wall plug blockers in all wall sockets. A few toys scattered here and there. They have been with their nannies. Liyema asked if he could relieve them of their duty. Why would he ask me? They are his staff. He went upstairs and soon two ladies walked down. They greeted and went out the door. Why two nannies? Isn't it a lot of money to hire them both? Liyema called me upstairs and my heart rate would not slow down. He led the way to what I assume is their room. I found a white gate

blocking the door of the room. I guess it's for their safety since they move about now. The first thing that caught my eye is the bright, playful colours on the wall. I'm glad he chose colour instead of the bland white baby rooms. When I stepped over the gate I saw four perfect people. I can't believe how big they are. Soon the room was filled with screams of excitement. They all crawled to Liyema's feet and grabbed onto his leg to stand. Liyema introduced me and he was not sure if he should refer to me as Mommy, Auntie or just Ntombi.

They all looked at me. I'm sure they wanted to check if they find my face familiar. I stood by the door frozen. What should I do next? Liyema grabbed my hand so I'd come closer. He sat down on the blue couch that was in the corner. I thought they would follow him but instead all just stared at me. I sat down on the couch so I'd be on their level. It's an overwhelming moment. I dreamt about it so much that I didn't know what to do in reality. I started with a low hi but no response. I took the cars from my bag and gave them each one.

They looked at the cheap plastic covered cars and then looked at what the other had. Bubele gave me his car. I thought he is rejecting it but Liyema said he wanted me to take it out of the wrapper. I did so and he smiled while turning the wheels with his little finger. Soon the other three gave theirs for me to open. The cars broke the ice because we played with them like crazy. They also gave me a few of their toys but took them back, gave them again and took them back. Doing so seemed to amuse them because I got a few naughty laughs when

they took them back. Liyema:
"I'm going to make them some
food for us. Will you be fine on your
own?", he asked and I nodded. He
stood from the couch making his
way to the door. Banele noticed
and soon followed his father and
so did the rest. Liyema said he'd
be back soon but they started to
cry. They didn't want to be left
with me. Why would they? I'm a
stranger. Ntombi: "You can take
them with you. I'll wait," I said
in a sad whisper. I wanted to cry.
Liyema: "They aren't crying
because they don't want to be
with you, Ntombi," he said to try

to make me feel better. "Okay, you don't believe me, I'll prove it. Please stand up," he added.

Ntombi: "Why?" I asked. Liyema: "I want to show you something," he said while taking my hand to help me up. When I was on my feet he sat down on the mat. The boys sat down with him. He told me to pretend to leave and wave at them. I did as told. Soon they pulled sad faces and started to cry. Liyema: "You see? It's not that they hate your company. They just have FOMO fear of missing out. They want to go with the person who seems to be

going away because they think you're going for a ride in a car. They love car rides," he said with a smile and I laughed. Ntombi: "I thought they were crying for you?", I sat back down. Bubele threw his short arms around my neck and I held onto him for dear life. Liyema: "Even if the boogymen was the one waving goodbye while walking out of the door, they would have cried for him. We have four little boys who don't want to be left behind. You'll have to leave late when they're asleep please or it'll take me while to make them stop crying after

you've left," he pleaded. "I see you've started to get Bubele's affections. They are all affectionate but my boy takes it up a notch. He likes hugs and extra neck tickles," he said with a smile. Banele came to me and I thought he would hug me too but no, he bit my left breast instead. "Banele, no, you don't bite others, boy!", he said in a stern voice. Banele sulked and was soon in my arms as well. Kids are just amazing. Ntombi: "It's okay. It wasn't painful," I lied because it was painful. I'm not even sure how many teeth are in that

mouth but I felt their power. Liyema: "How dare he bite the breast that fed him after he was the only one he got to get its milk?" he joked and we both laughed. Bandile looked at us and laughed the loudest. "Well it's only fair I give you a brief description of their personalities at present. Bubele like I've said is a gentle guy, he loves sharing and loves to be held. Like you see him clinging on to you right now, many of those are to follow. Banele is the quiet one and finds odd ways to get attention like biting as you've been a victim already. He hates

being shouted at with passion. Bandile over here is the easy going guy. He loves to laugh. There was a time I spilled coffee on my shirt before work. Guess who laughed the loudest? This guy. I don't know if he understands what he is laughing at but I think we have a future comedian. Bukhosi is the guy who likes his space. Like you see right now, he's keeping his distance. He comes close and cries only when needed. His Mr Serious," he whispered the last part. Ntombi: "Thanks for letting me know but next time can you not make it

sound as if you're a zoo keeper giving me a tour of the animals," we both laughed. Liyema: "How was I supposed to do it?"

Ntombi: I don't know but it felt weird listening to you. I'm sure Banele doesn't bite all the time," he laughed. Liyema: "Check those three scratches on his arm. He bit a cat and paid dearly for it. You wouldn't survive a day alone with this bunch," he exhaled

loudly. Ntombi: "Are you still going to make them food?" Liyema: "For all of us. They eat meat now," he said proudly. I picked up Bukhosi and Bubele and Liyema took

Banele and Bandile. Liyema first took my earrings off and we went downstairs. Bukhosi was indeed "the serious one. He is not easily impressed. I guess he takes it from his father. We first fed them though most of the food landed on their highchairs. It was fun. They can eat too, all of them. Liyema let me bath them. It was mostly them sitting in a bath playing with water and giving me a hard time when I had to take them out. I finally got them into their sleeping clothes. It's not easy to do this. I guess that's why they have

two nannies. They warmed up to me and I to them. I wish I could hold them all at the same time. Liyema can and I've envied. A while after bath time they fell asleep. I was in their room just hovering over the poor kids.

Liyema: "Ntombi," he said softly. "Sorry to disturb. Uhm...should I book a B&B for you or should we call a taxi to drop you off at Mrs Bam's", he added. Ntombi: "I have not told her I'm here. I don't have money for a B&B either. Let me call Mrs B and ask if I can go over," I took my phone out of my pocket. Liyema: "I've

got a room ready if I'm want to stay over and have breakfast with us tomorrow," he offered.

Ntombi: "I don't want to intrude, Liyema," I looked at the wall.

Liyema: "I wouldn't have offered if that were the case. I'm glad you didn't tell Mrs Bam. I doubt you'd be standing here if you had. I'm sure they will like breakfast with you," he pointed at the boys.

Ntombi: "This is the best moment this year. Thank you. You've done a great job at raising them," he smiled. Liyema: "Yeah I guess.

I'm sorry again. I know you can't bring back lost time but they are

still young so there is plenty of time ahead," we both smiled.

Ntombi: "What am I to them, Liyema? When I call them, should I say come to mommy, to aunt Ntombi or sisi?", I asked nervously. Liyema: "Whatever you're comfortable with," he smiled and walked away. I still couldn't find myself to get out of their room. They are perfect.

They smell good. I finally went to join Liyema. I found him throwing paper in the fire. He said it was the original and copy of our agreement. I don't believe him. Without the agreement I have

equal rights to them. I'm sure he has a copy somewhere just in case. I didn't care because my heart is full of too much joy. I accepted his offer of sleeping over. Maybe I was wrong about him. Maybe he isn't cold after all just too cautious. I don't want to go back tomorrow but I'm have to. Liyema doing this for me heals the wound losing my womb left in my heart. I forgave him for what he did. He actually didn't do anything wrong. He said from the beginning that he wanted to be a single father. I'm the one who messed things up by getting

attached. I went to their room one last time before going to bed. It felt like a dream. I love them, I always have. Liyema and I don't have the usual co parenting relationship. He can not even stand to be in the room with me alone for long, in fact he avoids it at all costs. I miss how we used to just chat about everything but those days are over. I'm not here for him though so I don't mind not being around him as long as I get to see my babies. My fantastic four.

THIRTY SIX

NTOMBI

It was a busy night for me not because the boys kept me up but because I kept on going to their room to check on them while there were sleeping. I'm not obsessed. I just want to enjoy every moment with them because I might see them after a long day. The bed in Liyema's guestroom is comfortable and I wish I could go with it to Port Elizabeth and replace my uncomfortable single bed. I got woken up by a loud cry. The sun had already come up. I got up

from the bed to check who is crying. The noise came from the kitchen. I found Liyema and Bubele alone. His father was trying to feed him but Bubele refused to eat. Liyema lost his patience a bit and I was not surprised. Ntombi: "You don't have to shout at him. I'm sure there is a reason why he isn't eating," I looked at Liyema who was not happy with my comment. I took my boy out of his chair and comforted him. Liyema: "I was not shouting. I'm trying to make him eat his breakfast. He wants to start with his milk first and

that's not how we do it. Bubele is just being difficult. I regret putting the bottles on the counter because when he saw it he wouldn't eat. Please put him back so I can try again," he said while trying to take the baby from me. Ntombi: "Let him calm down first, Liyema. No use trying again when he is still upset. What harm could drinking milk before food do anyway?", I asked while rubbing my baby's back. Liyema: "It's just how we do things. It's a part of their routine. He won't want to eat his porridge should I give him the bottle first and milk

is not food. Please sit him back down," he ordered Ntombi: "Put the food down, I'll feed him myself. Are the others still sleeping?" Liyema: "It'd 9am, Ntombi. They get up at about 6:30am. They are in the lounge playing and if this one was not being so difficult he'd be there too," he pointed at Bubele with a spoon. Ntombi: "Go check on the others. I'll feed him," I looked at his hesitant face. Liyema: "Okay," he put the yellow bowl on the table and walked out. "No bottle, Ntombi," he stood by the door and walked away. I can't believe that

I let the poor man feed and make bottles for them all alone while I slept. Why didn't he wake me up? I feel so useless now. I put Bubele down. I didn't know how to trick him into eating his food. Why would Liyema not treat them like the individuals they are. Maybe the other three like eating first and down it with milk later and Bubele prefers his milk and then food later. I could see that he hated that I questioned his routine. I tried all kinds of tricks and dances but my boy would not part his teeth. I pretended to eat his food and made it seem like

the most delicious thing I've ever tasted. At first he just watched me while I acted but then he opened his mouth. I put the porridge filled spoon in his mouth and continued to act as though I was eating until the bowl was empty. He deserved a round of applause for finishing so I cheered for him. He smiled and clapped his hands too. It was the most perfect moment of my life. I took him out of the chair after wiping his mouth and hands. We joined the others in the lounge. The rest came crawling to me when they saw me and lifted

their arms up. It felt great to be wanted. I almost stuck my tongue out to Liyema just for spite but I don't know how much of my silliness he can take. We played and watched cartoons. I'm not sure if they understood what they were watching but all three were glued to the screen. Liyema had left us alone most of the time. I single handedly got all four of them ready with great struggle but felt super proud of myself afterwards. We had snack too. Liyema joined us after a while saying its nap time. I didn't want them to sleep but they had to

nap. Soon all of them were asleep. Liyema: "They will be done for an hour at most. I'll go check if I can find a pharmacy that is open. I'm not feeling so well," he shut his eyes, opened them and blinked a few times. "I'll be back before they wake up. Will you be fine on your own?" he asked. Ntombi: "What's wrong?" I asked and stood close to him. Liyema: "I'll know in a few minutes but I suggest that you take the opportunity to take a shower now while they are down," he looked at me from head to toe. "Maybe brush the teeth too," he laugh softly

and I actually laughed too.

Ntombi: "You're mean, Liyema. Has anyone told you that?" I smiled.

Liyema: "No, I'm not. I just know how one can lose track of time when looking after them. I know you brush your teeth first thing in the morning, I've lived with you remember. But those four control over lives now. Welcome to the circus, Mommy," he smiled and walked out. He called me Mommy. I never thought I'd hear him say so. I took a whiff of my breath and yeah I needed to go freshen up. I took the opportunity to bath as advised by

the man who knows the boys best. After my shower I went to go check on them, they were still asleep. I went to prepare their bottles because Liyema said it was the first thing they want after a nap. I read the instructions on the tin carefully and measured as per instructed. The door flung open and Liyema appeared. He looked uncomfortable. He seems uncomfortable with he is alone with me. I apologized for being half naked in his kitchen and went upstairs to get dressed. It seems the boys are planning to

take a longer nap than one hour. I found Liyema watching sport. He stood to go to another room and I just couldn't take him avoiding me anymore so I went to go ask him about it. Liyema: "M...me avoiding you," he pointed his finger at me and laughed nervously. Ntombi: "Okay if I'm wrong then let's go sit and watch TV," it seems my words didn't go well with him. Liyema: "Cool," he walked pass me going to the lounge. He put the sport channel back on. I sat next to him and he shifted away slightly. I must repulse him. Ntombi: "So what did

the doctor say?", he didn't bother to look my way. His eyes were glued on the screen. Liyema: "I didn't go to a doctor. I went to the pharmacy. They say it's flu and gave me medicine to take. Thanks for asking," he looked at me briefly and back at the screen. "Should I book an early or late flight for you for tomorrow?" Ntombi: "A late one please," I said softly. "Liyema, I'm sorry that you've had to spend so much money to get me here. Next time I'll pay for myself, I promise," he looked at me. Liyema: "You're not bankrupting me, Ntombi so relax,"

he looked at me. Ntombi: "Thanks though. So should I make you something to eat so you can take your pills for the man flu," I asked and he laughed. Liyema: "Man flu," he laughed while shaking his head. "I got something on the way. I'm good thanks," he added. Ntombi: "Okay," I said in a whisper. Both of us kept quiet and focused on the screen. Liyema: "Could you perhaps make that lamb stew with the mini dumplings tonight for dinner please. I'd make them but I have been craving yours. If you can not..." Ntombi: "I'll make

it. Let me go take the meat out of the freezer," I stood but he stopped me saying he will do it because I'll get my hands cold. He took too long and I'm guessing he just doesn't want to come back to sit next to me. He blew into his hands and rubbed them together while walking back to the lounge. Liyema: "All done. I'm sure the boys will enjoy the meal too. I'm salivating just thinking about it," he licked his lips and I laughed. "They are taking a long nap today," he looked upstairs. Ntombi: "I thought you'd be happy," I laughed. Liyema: "I am,

it's just unusual," he put his feet on the table. "How did you react when you found out my you were pregnant with four babies," he asked unexpectedly. Ntombi: "I can't remember. All I know is I didn't believe the doctor. I don't want to go through that again. Well at least I'm 100% sure I won't," I laughed awkwardly. Liyema: "I'm sorry about your womb, Ntombi", he said softly while looking at me. Ntombi: "It's okay. I mourned the loss of my womb way before I even met you," my words made me get his full attention. He was looking at

me to explain what I meant.

"Something happened that torn my womb. The doctors believed I'd never carry a baby to term. I was shocked to hear that it had healed when I was pregnant," I played with my fingers. Liyema: "Does this thing that happened that caused you to hurt your womb have anything to do with your ex?", he asked. I sometimes forget Mrs B told him about Bonga. "I'm glad that you left him, Ntombi. Things never end well for women in such situations. I wish you told me about it when you were here being forced to do

something you don't want to," he said softly. I wiped my tears off quickly. Ntombi: "Had I done that. We wouldn't have four people taking a nap upstairs right now. This moment would not have happened. I'm sorry for coming in false pretenses but I don't regret it. In fact if there is one thing I thank Bonga for, it's forcing me to meet you and being your surrogate" Liyema: "So if you could do it all over again, would you?" I nodded "They love you. I'm glad you're here. I know I can be a jerk sometimes so thanks for not hating me," he looked at

me. Ntombi: "Let's put everything behind us. Everything that has happened can not be undone,"

Liyema: "Have you been single since leaving that coward?", he asked and I nodded. "So what's with the guy you were with at the wedding?" he looked at me.

Ntombi: "He was my date for the day," Liyema: "A date that touch

your butt?" he said. If I did not know better I'd have said he is jealous but that's not possible.

Ntombi: "What's it to you?", I asked with a smile. Liyema:

"There were kids at the party. The least giraffe could do was

hold your waist while dancing, not your damn butt," Ntombi: "It's my butt and I did not mind him touching it" Liyema: "Whatever. I think they awake," he stood and ran upstairs. Why does he care if Soso touched my butt. The moment was so perfect and we were making progress until he brought that up. How dare he call Soso a giraffe. He might be tall and skinny but he is no giraffe. I screamed into the cushion to stop the sound from being loud. Liyema is going to be the death of me. He came down saying the boys are still asleep. He apologized and I

decided to let it pass. I asked him about his ex wife and was sad to hear that she cheated on him. He gets under my skin but he didn't deserve what she did to him. He says he has gotten over it since seeing a therapist. I believed him. His voice and his face showed he had made peace with how his marriage ended. I'm not there yet. Even after all the therapy sessions I've had, I still cry and get upset when thinking about the things Bonga did to me. I hope someday I'll reach the peace Liyema has. He also told me about his twin sister's accident and said

it took him longer to get over it. He took out a picture of her. She wore a school uniform and smiled like she was paid to do it. She didn't look like Liyema. She looked more like their mom. The girl looked familiar but there is no way I could have met her. The boys finally woke up after a two hour nap. I must have overdid the playtime earlier on and exhausted them too much. Liyema tried not to cough on them but could not stop them from wanting his attention. LIYEMA I don't understand how some men can hit the woman they claim to love.

Ntombi is still healing from the ordeal, hence it still makes her cry when she talks about it. I hate seeing her hurt. I hate that she has lost trust in men. She's too young for the burdens she has had to carry. I hope being with the boys will bring some healing to her. Me on the other hand have made peace with my past. So much so that I'd like to give love another chance but the woman I'm in love with is not in love with me. Seeing her in just a towel aroused me. She is a beautiful woman with a great body. A body I wish I could

caress. Snapping earlier on because of her friend touching her butt came as a shock to me too. He hope she did not realize it's because I'm jealous. I wanted to touch her butt. I wanted to love and touch all of her. I gave her space to be with the kids alone this morning. The little rascals behaved well with their mother but with me they become little monsters. The dudes didn't even cry when I left them alone in the lounge. I think think they have found a new favourite person and you don't blame them. It feels strange to say "their mother"

but I'll get used to it because that's what Ntombi is to them. I woke up with a blocked nose, headache and just feeling crappy. I hope the medication will help. I told the doctor at the chemist that I'm HIV positive just in case there is different flu medication for us. He advised that I see a doctor should the symptoms not be better tomorrow and I'm plan to. I don't want my viral load to drop. The six of us were playing nicely. They love the cars she got them. She keeps going on about how cheap they were but they don't care.

It's their favorite toys at the moment. A soft knock disturbed our playtime. I went to open and Mma stood smiling in front of me. I told her it was not a good time because I'm sick. She told me that she's here for her four balls of everything cute and walked pass me to the lounge where the noise came from. Mma: "Ntombi?", she said in her soft voice and turned to look at me with a smile. Ntombi stood to greet her. They shared a long hug. Mma checked Ntombi from head to toe and smiled more. "Liyema have you seen Ntombi?" she asked. Liyema:

"What kind of a question is that? She is standing right there. Of course I've seen her," I said while looking at her. Mma: "I mean have you seen, seen her? Like have you seen how sexy she looks. Look at you, you sexy Mama," she said in a strange voice. Ntombi: "Thanks, Ma," she blushed.

Liyema: "I'm going to take a nap. And since you said you're here for those four, I'm sure you won't mind," I said and kissed her cheek.

Mma: "Get well soon, my boy. I'll cook some soup for you," she put her hand on my forehead. Liyema: "No, no, no Ntombi will make us

her stew. I've been craving it since she left the place. I'm not eating anything else tonight," I said in protest and both women laughed. Mma: "Mmm okay," she said with in that strange voice again. I went upstairs and left them. My body needed to rest. This flu will be the end of me. I hate that Mma put me on the spot like that. Of course I see how sexy Ntombi is, I'm not blind. That's why I make sure I don't hover around her for too much. I see the sexy Mama. I want to kiss the sexy Mama and I want to do much, much more with the

sexy Mama. That is why it's safe for me to be away from the sexy Mama. I fell asleep as soon as I got on my bed. The pills must be strong. I got up after an hour and walked to the kitchen to get water. Ntombi's stew was already simmering and her dough is rising well too. I have not even had lunch yet but I'm already dreaming about dinner. Mma sat and had coffee with Ntombi. The boys were having their afternoon nap. I hope it won't be long because they won't want to sleep on their usual bed time. The ladies were chatting like old

friends. There was a sound coming from the baby monitor in the lounge. Ntombi did not waste any time, she stood up and ran upstairs. She fell halfway and I jumped the couch like a superman to go check if she is okay. She is rubbing her knee so I guess it got hurt. I rushed up the few steps to get to her. She had her dress up to her thigh. I put my hands on her knee, rubbing it gently. Liyema: "Does it hurt a lot?", I asked and looked at her. Damn she is beautiful. Her lips are full and I can only imagine how soft they are. She smelled

good too, not perfume but soapy. She was waving her hand in front of my face and I snapped out of my thoughts. I've been starrng at her with an open mouth for who knows how long. Ntombi: "I'm fine really. Let me go check if they are awake. We made sandwiches for lunch so help yourself," she said while lowering her dress to cover her thigh. She stood and walked up. I found Mma at the bottom of the stairs laughing. Mma: "It's almost painful to watch you act like this. I'm shocked you didn't drool on her leg," she laughed louder. Liyema: I

don't know what you're talking about," I walked past her heading to the kitchen. She followed behind me. Mma: "You're in love with her," she whispered in my ear. Liyema: "Don't you have a spa date with a friend or a nail day?", I asked. Mma: "I'm not leaving, not after you made it clear you'll have nothing else but Ntombi's food. I want that too," she looked at me "Tell her how you feel. You two already have kids. I'm so glad you allowed her to visit. She is a lovely girl," she added. Liyema: "I don't have feelings for Ntombi and she

definitely does not have any for me. My main focus is the boys, not dating," I lied. I wanted to date her. Mma: "Keep lying to yourself but I'm know you. You are in love and it feels good to see you like this. You have my blessing. The two of you can raise the boys together" Liyema: "We can't. Ntombi is a student in PE," I made excuses. Mma: "And universities don't do tranfers? I can have your dad call around and she can be in one o..." Liyema: "Mma no, I don't want that and she doesn't either. She'll visit when she can," Ntombi joined us

saying the boys have not woken up yet. Mma: "Ntombi, you need to consider transferring to one of the Universities here. That way you can visit everyday. You can live at a student house or perhaps Liyema might be kind enough to offer you a room," she winked at me. I felt like dying. Ntombi: "I'll see, Ma. Ntombi continued to busy herself with her cooking. I wanted Mma to go home already. The boys got up. Mma kept on saying things like "wouldn't it be nice to have mommy around, hey granny's bubbles" at them. I had to excuse myself because I'm

could not stand how awkward she made things between Ntombi and I. The day was good non the less. We played, the boys cried and played once again. The food I had been looking for all day was finally in front of me. Oh it tasted better than the last time I had it so much better I had seconds. Mma asked for recipe and Ntombi said she does not use measuremts because she knew just the quantities of spices to add. She wouldn't let the boys have some because she said it was too spicy. The boys were bathed and went to bed for the night. Not even

the flu could keep me from having a good time. I'm surprised I tasted the food. I'm sure the pills were helping. Mma went home after we put the boys to bed. We were exhausted so we called it a night too. I took an extra pill of the flu medication so I'd heal quicker and went to bed. I was asleep when I felt warm lips on mine. I turned to lay on my back and Ntombi was smiling at me when I opened my eyes. I lifted my head to kiss her and she was soon on top of me. The kiss became passionate and I wanted to rip her clothes off. I first had

to check if she was sure about this. The way she kissed and proceeded to touch my entire body told me she wanted it as much as I did. I held her tight and turned to be on top. Both of us hungry for each other. We ripped each other's clothes off and were soon naked. The feel of her skin against mine. Her breast against my chest made me want to be inside of her but I decided to take my time. I looked at her body taking in all of her. Our lips met once again. I kissed her lips, her neck and her soft breasts. I kissed and loved each and every

single part of her body. I grabbed a condom and put it on. I kissed her while going inside of her slowly. The tightness and warmth of her fold drove me insane. I didn't want the moment to end. Her moans and the way she would say my name aroused me even more. We both reached climax at the same time, that has never happened to me before. I looked at her while we both tried to catch our breaths. The look in her eyes was a mixture of love and lust. I kissed her and held her so tight. Not a word was spoken. We both just went to

sleep. I woke up and looked next to me. Ntombi had a blanket wrapped around her body but her arms and shoulders were bare. I thought about what happened last night and smiled. My pyjamas were on the couch. I got up from the bed feeling tired. I found a damp towel on the floor. I'm sure she used it to clean herself. I looked for the condom on my side of the floor but couldn't find it. I checked the entire floor but still nothing. I went to look in the bin but there was nothing. I woke up with my boxers on so I checked if I still had it on but I didn't. My

heart started to race like crazy. I used a condom so why can't I find it? Had Ntombi thrown it away she would have put it in the bin in my room. Did she flush it? The went to her side of the bed and knelt beside her. I shook her gently to wake her up. She opened her eyes after a while. Ntombi: "What?," she asked sounding sleepy and annoyed. Liyema: "What did you do with the condom, Ntombi?" she looked confused. "After last night, did you flush it?", I asked with urgency. Ntombi: "What? A condom? I didn't throw a condom away," she

said still sleepy. I made love to her without a condom? Liyema: "Get up now!" I went to my wardrobe to get a tracksuit to wear. Ntombi: "I don't get it, Liyema. What's going on? Why are you asking me about a condom?", she sat up. Liyema: "I have to take you to the hospital. They have pills to prevent this.

Dammit how the fuck could I have been so stupid," I wore my pants. "Get up and get dressed, Ntombi. I can't believe I was so reckless," I was angry at myself. Ntombi: "Liyema, you're scaring me. What's going on?" she looked

at me with tears in her eyes.

Liyema: "W...w...we had unprotected sex. I don't remember what I did with the condom and you say you didn't get rid of it. So it means we didn't use one," I said in panic. She was still in bed looking at me like I'm a madman. I don't wanna give her HIV. Dammit I won't be able to live with her hating me because that is what will happen if I infect her. But she can still take treatment to prevent it. Ntombi: "You think we...Liyema we did not have sex. Look I'm still fully dressed," she pulled the blanket

aside to reveal her strapless dress. She had it on yesterday but with a jacket over. I thought she was naked all this time. "I heard you make weird noises last night so I came to check on you. You were burning up so I helped you out of your pyjamas. I went to wet a towel with cold water to cool you down. Your temperature went down after an hour but I decided to sleep next to you just in case. I was going to get up during the night but must have overslept. We did not have sex, I promise. You're half naked because I

thought it would help. I'm sorry," she explained. I walked to the edge of the bed and sat down. The relief I felt was indescribable. Liyema: "It's okay. I'm sorry for the way I reacted. I thought we did it," I looked at her and she smiled. Ntombi: "It's okay. I'm sure you thought I was naked with this dress not having straps and the way I covered myself with the blanket and then I took your clothes off. I'd have thought the worst too," she laughed softly. "So why would we go to the hospital? What did we need to prevent?" I looked at her.

Liyema: "Uhm...pregnancy. I wanted to get you morning after pills. Ntombi can't be a father again so soon," I lied. Ntombi: "No womb remember?" she joked about her situation and laughed. I pretended to laugh. Liyema: "Slipped my mind, sorry. Thanks for helping me take my temperature down," we both smiled. She stood and excused herself. I felt like the biggest fool ever. I hallucinated the entire thing. I never kissed nor made love to her. It was all in my mind and she blame those bloody pills for it. I went to the

bathroom to wet my face. How will I look at her again after this? At least I managed to give her an excuse as to why I wanted to take her to the hospital. I'm the fool of the year and I'm sure Ntombi will laugh with her friends about it. When we had breakfast she was normal and told me to forget about it because she knew it was the pills that did that because I took one too many. We soon joked about it and she made me feel better. How I wish we really made love, with protection of course but it seems she's not into me in a romantic way.

THIRTY SEVEN

Ntombi

I've been back in Port Elizabeth for a while now. Liyema offered to fly me over to Cape Town again and I had to decline. I wanted to say yes so badly but I can't expect him to pay for my travels almost every weekend. I don't want to get a job now either because I'd have to work on weekend. I just want to up and go each weekend I have money to do so. Varsity has been hectic and

my mind being in Cape Town most of the time did not make it any easier. I miss my children. I miss their hugs and even the naughty tantrums they occasionally throw. I have been video calling them almost every night I don't want them to forget my face and voice. They get so excited when they see my face appear on their father's tablet. It makes me want to hug them through the screen. I'm happy and I can't believe that after everything I've gone through I'm finally able to say I'm happy and mean it. My life feels complete with them in

it. Tomorrow it will be their first birthday but I unfortunately won't be able to go to Cape Town because of school. I've been saving some money so I should be able to afford a ticket for the coming weekend, the cheapest one I can find. I have been living on noodles just to be able to afford it. It was a cold Monday night and I missed Liyema's fireplace because our three bar heater was just too weak. Xoli walked into the kitchen while I'm making notes while sipping on a hot cup of coffee. She went to the fridge to get something to eat I assume.

Xoli: "We have a cake in the fridge? I've been craving a sweet treat since yesterday," she said while taking the chocolate cake out of the fridge.

Ntombi: "No, friend. I'm sorry but you can't eat it now. We can only cut it tomorrow on the quadruplets birthday. I can't be with them in flesh but I can celebrate with them," she put the cake back with disappointment. "I'm sorry," I stood and went to hug her. She sulked more and I laughed.

Xoli: "So you will miss their big day?" she said while taking a cup

to make herself coffee. "Well that suck", she added.

Ntombi: "I think Liyema will only have a big party for them on Saturday. I have money saved to get myself there," I sat back down to look at my textbook.

Xoli: "I thought you said he offered a few weekends ago to fly you over," I nodded. "Then why did you not go. Being there clearly makes you happy," she added.

Ntombi: "I don't like him spending money on me. I already feel guilty for not being able to help him with some of the baby expenses,"

she looked at me like I'm the dumbest person alive.

Xoli: "He does not mind. In fact he should give you a baby mama allowance. You are the one baby mama I can say deserve such after carrying four babies and losing your womb in the process. You deserve a bells and a baby mama allowance," we both laughed. "But seriously though if it was crippling his budget he would not have offered. Next time accept his help, miss independent. You are a broke student so get off your high horse," she ordered.

Ntombi: "More like a considerate horse. I'll try though but not the baby mama allowance," she laughed.

Xoli: "Could there be something brewing between mommy and daddy. He might not really be my favorite person as of yet but he is hot," she said in a flirtatious voice.

Ntombi: "Nothing going on there. I care for him and respect him but no, I'm not in love with him," I said honestly.

Xoli: "So no hot steamy kiss, even if it was in a moment of just

being horny from you two?", she asked and I shook my head. "Oh my word, you need more help then I thought. You let a dish pass you by when you have not eaten in years," I laughed so much.

Ntombi: "Something kinda did happen but not really," I said making no sense at all. She just looked at me. "He was sick and I went to help and ended up sleeping next to him, not with him but next to him. He got up and thought...he thought we had sex the previous night," I blushed.

Xoli: "Do you want to?", she looked into my eyes.

Ntombi: "No I don't. But I have to confess. When I took his pajamas off and I noticed there was a bulge in his boxers I kinda, just kinda felt some parts of me react," she laughed so much.

Xoli: "So guy had a hard-on and he thought you had sex. Could it be that he had a wet dream with you being his lover," I threw the pen's lid at her and we both laughed.

Ntombi: "Gross man, no I'm sure it was a reaction his body had while being sick. Do grown men still have those...wet dreams I

mean?" I blushed and she kept laughing.

Xoli: "Some do and he did. So you feel nothing for this man? Leave the care, respect and reaction your body had when you saw him half naked, I mean like feeling," she asked.

Ntombi: "I really have non of those, friend. You know I'd have told you or shown signs had I had feelings for him," she looked at me but did not seem convinced.

Xoli: "So if I make a move on him, you'd be okay with it?" she asked but I kept quiet. "See if you did

not feel anything you would not have to think about the answer first," she pointed her finger at me.

Ntombi: "No I don't have feelings for him. It just would be a weird situation you dating him while he has kids with me. I don't think our friendship would be the same," I said while writing my notes.

Xoli: "Okay I believe you and you don't have to worry I don't want him. I like my men white now after what Nana's dad did to me. White men are better when it

comes to treating a lady right," she said.

Ntombi: "I don't have any desire to date a white man. I like our chocolate brothers and not all are bad. There are white men who are jerks too. It's about the man not the entire race," I said while looking at her.

Xoli is not the first person I heard say white men are better. What makes them any better than Black, Indian and colored men? I respect that she prefers them but I don't think it is right to bash black men just because she had a bad experience with

one. I guess I'm not really one to talk because I think all men are abusers because one man treated me like trash. Both Xoli and I had some issues to deal with in our dating lives. I was being truthful when I said I don't have feelings for Liyema. He is a handsome man, goodness is he handsome and I'm glad my boys got some of his genes but I don't think we will be able to make a relationship work. The smallest things I do annoy him. He thinks I'm "too playful". He needs someone as serious as he is. I let the boys get away with a lot and he is strict. I've messed

up his routine a few times and he hated it. We would frustrate each other too much, well I would annoy him too much no wonder the poor man walks away when I come into a room. Mike came home from his girlfriend's place at rez. He also eyed my boys birthday cake and I had to police the fridge every hour just to check if there was no piece missing. I sent Dudu a text inviting her to come enjoy cake with us. If they agree we can video call and sing to them. I know they will love it. They love phones but their dad does not give his. "Ntombi, they

will break your phone's screen when you let them play as if it's a toy. Don't come crying to me", Mrs Elephant would say when I let them have my phone. He needs to relax. I don't own a phone that costs R16 000 and needs insurance like his. I got mine for R1500 only. Liyema needs to just let go and let live. I've been thinking about what Mrs E said about going to study there. She said she could help if I needed a transfer. I first have to talk to my bursary company first. Mrs E has been asking about Makhulu. It seems she is fond of my

granny. Tamkhulu called saying that he can't keep the secret anymore. He confessed to being in touch with Liyema. Of course I had to be dramatic first by not speaking to him for a day but I soon realized that had he not, I might perhaps not have seen the boys. I was so excited to see them. My phone was giving problems and have only now been able to sent them the pictures and videos I took of the boys. Makhulu called and she could not stop going on about how beautiful and gown they are. She asked that I come home with them but

I don't think Liyema will allow it yet. Makhulu said she has put me on speaker phone because Tamkhulu wanted to talk to me. NTOMBI: "I'm listening, Tata," I said. There was some fiddling sound coming from the other side of the line.

Tamkhulu: "Nto-Nto, when will this boy come to speak to me and your father about damages. He has been avoiding the question so I'm asking you. I see you take pictures with the boys and I'm happy but according to culture he should not have them until he

pays respect to you by paying for damages," he shouted.

Ntombi: "I don't think Liyema has intention of doing that and I don't blame him. We did not have s...we did not conceive the boys naturally so he did not really "damage" me," I said choosing the most respectable words ever.

Tamkhulu: "Well that does not matter. Tell him to call me or he will meet me at his father's house." he shouted even louder.

Ntombi: "Okay, Tata I will. But is it not Makhulu and other

women who have to go to his home?", I asked curiously.

Tamkhulu: "Do not bother yourself with the details. Let us do things right for these boys to have a bright future. We mess with culture, we risk messing with their lives. I love you, goodbye!" he shouted.

Makulu said a few last words before cutting the call. Why do old people shout so much when they speak on the phone? I don't even know how I will start the conversation about damages with Liyema. If he is avoiding the topic. It means he does not want

to do it and I don't blame him. Shouldn't a boy have sex in order for the family to claim that he "damaged" me? Or is the pregnancy itself "the damage"? I thought I knew culture but I clearly have a lot to learn. After studying for the test I have later in the week, I called Liyema well I did not want to speak to him though. I went to bed after blowing kisses to my bundles of joy. Hoping that my housemates won't eat their cake. I don't trust those two when it comes to sweet treats.

LIYEMA

I told Vusi about my embarrassing non-existent sexual moment with Ntombi and even after a few days I have not heard the end of it. I still fantasize about the images of that dream though. I wonder if her body is the way it was in the dream without any clothes on. Vusi said I needed to get laid and he is right or I will go crazy but I want Ntombi. The day we took her to the airport was hell for me and the boys. I could see their hysterical cries broke her heart. I was crying too but internally. I did not like seeing her go but she

has a life. I offered to pay for her tickets again but she has not allowed me to. I know she feels like a burden but she is not. I understand that she is a student and her family is not well off like mine so they can't just give her money spontaneously. I've respected her decision to pay for her own ticket though but it has not worked in anyone's favor because she needs to save first. She also insists on buying clothes for them which is not a must. She needs to accept that she can't do for them what I can materialistically yet and that it's

okay. They want her, not what gifts she comes with. When I end the video calls they cry. I don't tell her that because I don't want her to over think it. I struggle each night with four crying boys after the call ends and it breaks my heart that they can't get her snuggles. I'm sure her cuddles are more warm and loving than mine. She's also more gentle with them and now they are left with the strict parent. Today is their birthday and I have a big surprise for them, I also got the great news that Banele has outgrown his sleeping

decease. I'm proud of my boy and Ntombi was cheering like his personal cheerleader over videos call telling him how proud she is of him. I admit that she can be a bit too much for me at times and even annoys me but that is what I miss most. I miss how lite the air at home feels when she was here. The boys did not even throw a lot of tantrums. Between the playing, the singing, dancing, cheering for nothing and clapping hands, they had no time to sulk. I miss that. They have been with me longest but she just gets them. I woke up and went to

their room. They were all standing in their cots and jumped up and down smiling when I walked in. these moments make my days feel worth living. I started to sing happy birthday them in a nice slow tone. They just stared at me. Ntombi called and I put her on speaker. She sang but in a fun way. They even smiled when she sang. They tried to say "Hooray" too but it was not quite right. She wished me a happy birthday too. I've put in a lot of hours at the office to get big projects done so I'd be able to spend time with them and

surprise them. Soon the messages from the extended family came through for me and the boys.

Mma also called to sing for us and wanted to spend the day with us but I told her she can't. She

went on about how sad she was that I don't want her to spend

the day with us but when she

heard that we are going to PE

she got excited. I'll be going with

Patricia, one of their nannies. She

has never been on a plane before

and is nervous. I've flown with

the boys before to introduce them

to some extended family and when

we went on a family trip with my

parents. I just hope they won't be difficult because flying with four babies is no joke that is why I decided to take their nanny with. It's our birthday yet we will be surprising Ntombi. We got the boys ready. Me Eunice packed our clothes last night. Our flight is for this afternoon because Ntombi will have classes in the morning until noon. Mma has organized a party for them for Saturday and I hope Ntombi will make it. I know she has a big test on Friday but she has plenty of time to get on a plane and come over. The time went by

quick and we were on the plane to PE before we knew it. Aside from the attention seeking crying, they actually behaved. I'm also used to having random people come to us to ask if they are quadruplets by now. That was what happened when we arrived at the PE airport. They love the attention too. I hired a car. I also hired car seats because I was not about to put their lives at risk. I'm feeling nervous. I don't even know if Ntombi will be home. When we arrived at her place I asked that she step out because I'm outside. She came out looking confused but

screamed when she sat Pat take the boys out of the car. I had no control after that. She called her friends out to introduce them to the boys. I can't keep track of the number of kisses they got from her.

Mike: "I still can't believe that you're a mother of four," he said while holding Bandile.

Ntombi: "And I'm not even thirty yet, dude," she laughed. "But I love it", she tickled Bukhosi and he laughed.

Xoli: "Your timing though. We were just about to cut a cake mommy

bought to celebrate their birthday.," she said.

Liyema: "I'm known for having good timing. If you guys like, we can all go out and celebrate. My treat," I said. Xoli put Bubele down and ran inside. I guess to get ready. We all just laughed. Dudu seems like a quiet person. She and Mike went inside with the boys while Ntombi and I stood outside.

Ntombi: "Thank you," she smiled.

Liyema: "They forced me. They said if mommy can't come to them for their birthday then I should

take them to mommy. I'm being bullied in that house since your visit," I joked and we laughed. Her arms wrapped themselves around my waist. I froze like a statue.

Ntombi: "Oh relax, It's just a hug," she put my arms around her shoulders so I'd hug her back. "A hug won't kill you, Ndlovu", she added. I loved that she calls me Ndlovu. No one else has.

Liyema: "My heart has already stopped actually," she laughed. I meant it. My heart paused for a second when she hugged me.

Ntombi: "Happy Birthday to you too. I know you would not have liked the others to know because you just don't want attention," she tilted her head backwards to look up at me. Her chin rested on my chest. In a perfect world I'd lower my head to kiss her but we are not in a perfect world. She planted a quick kiss on my right cheek and let go.

Liyema: "Thanks. You remember Pat right. I did not even get to introduce her to your friends because of the excitement," I said pointing at Pat.

Ntombi hugged Pat and invited us inside. The boys had cake all around their mouth by the time I went in. I did not make a fuss because they seemed to enjoy it. We sang for them and they clapped hands in excitement. I wish they could be this happy all the time. Xoli came out looking beautiful but too overdressed for the baby friendly place I plan on taking them to. Ntombi said we should leave her, it's just how she is. We did not all fit in the car and Ntombi and her friends said they would take a taxi. I didn't want her to. I wanted us and our boys

in the car but let her go with her friends. When we got to the restaurant I told them about the special day. The staff was singing soon after. The Elephant boys love attention, all of them. Even the usually grumpy Bukhosi was just having fun. It must be the PE air. Ntombi's friends loved them. The people in the restaurant were intrigued by the quadruplets, some had never seen any. Some asked Ntombi how the pregnancy was and she answered them. Ntombi's friends had to leave. They thanked me for the great time, free meal and drinks

too. Pat sat at the back with the boys and Ntombi sat in the passenger seat. She might as well have gone to the back because she was looking back most of the trip. I booked us into a B&B. Tomorrow morning we will be going back to Cape Town. Pat asked if she could go to her sister's. I allowed it because I needed her help to get the boys ready and in the plane. She promised she'd be in time tomorrow to help me. I unpacked their toys so they could play. I thought they would be napping by now. I guess they are on a sugar

rush. Ntombi sat on the couch and watched them play on the mat while I was busy doing nothing actually. I just liked looking at the five of them. I decided to go sit next to her, I don't want her to feel I'm avoiding her again. I threw myself the couch and she hated it because it made her bounce.

Liyema: "I think they will only fall asleep at night.," I made conversation.

Ntombi: "Thanks again for this, Liyema. I did not expect it. I can't wait for them to speak full sentences so they can tell me

what you are up to," she said and we both laughed.

Liyema: "It was a pleasure and no, I did not spend a lot of money. Their tickets were actually sponsored by a client who adores them," I lied.

Ntombi: "Good, I'm glad. I really missed them. I've been thinking of studying in Cape Town next year," her words were music to my ears. I tried to hide my excitement by breaking eye contact

Liyema: "They would love that," I said knowing very well that I

would too. She looked like she has something on her mind though.

Ntombi: "I need to tell you something. I don't want to talk about this but my grandpa will ask when he calls. Uhm...it's about you paying damages," she said softly while looking at the boys.

Liyema: "I'll sort that out, Ntombi. My father happens to agree with your grandfather. Tell the old man I'll be in touch and I'm sorry for stalling,"

Ntombi: "I don't want you to do it. They are 100% dependent on you and now my family wants money when the boys don't live

us," she said with a cute frown on her forehead.

Liyema: "He actually prefers livestock not money," I laughed softly. Her grandpa is old fashioned and my dad likes it.

Ntombi: "That you have to pay for,"

Liyema: "It helps to have a dad who owns a farm, so don't worry. We are going back tomorrow so enjoy this time with them and stop worrying about such things,"

Ntombi: "I wish you could stay longer," she said softly and looked at me.

Liyema: "Me too but you will be coming to their party Saturday though so yeah," she smiled.

Bukhosi: "Ama", he said while giving her a toy. Ntombi could not contain herself. She picked him up and he said it over and over again.

Liyema: "That did not sound like Mama at all," she looked at me.

Ntombi: "Jealous much, Ndlovu?"
we both laughed.

They have been saying a few words more clearly lately. I have been trying to make them say Tata but nope they instead tried to say Mma's cat's name. "Ama"

does sound close enough to Mama. One would think they would say dad first. We joined the boys on the mat and played with them. It started to get dark out. We fed them, bathed them and soon they were fast asleep. They are officially one. I ordered food for Ntombi and I. It seemed she wanted to sleep over so she'd be here to say goodbye tomorrow morning. I'm sure she did not know how to ask. The room has a double bed on which we strategically place the boys with pillows on the sides and a single bed that I was going to sleep on.

I offered the single bed for her and said I'd sleep on the very short and soft couch. She agreed right away. I'll wake up with a sore body tomorrow but what the heck. I took the extra blanket they got and put it on the couch. I offered her a pair of my clean boxers and a shirt to sleep in, the same shirt I intend on wearing tomorrow. She looked cute and her perky, round ass did my boxers some justice. It fit tightly on her. She came to join me on the couch because her show was on TV. I was sleepy but she was on my "bed" so i could not sleep yet. I

made about the leading man of the show and she defended him like crazy. I guess it's her celebrity crush. She later laughed though. We had a great chat. It was like old times again when I'd go to her room to just chill. We tried to keep the noise down but there were moments we failed. We were both under the blanket on the couch soon enough. We sat and watched another movie. We were laughing at something softly and I don't know where I got the courage to kiss her but I did. She didn't kiss me back at first. She looked at me. I kissed

her again and her lips moved, kissing me back. Her lips feel incredible. I put my hand on her knee, making sure to not break the kiss. She climbed on top of me. The kiss became more intense. Saying I'm turned on would be an understatement, I craved her. She was careful and did not allow her hands to explore my body but that was okay. I placed my hands under the oversized T-shirt she wore. I wrapped my right arms around her waist to bring her closer to me. I wanted her to feel how badly I wanted her. My left arms went up, I cupped her

warm, soft breast in my hands and gently kneaded it. Her nipples were erect. I managed to take her arm out of one sleeve but she broke the kiss, got off me and sat at a distance.

Ntombi: "I'm not going to sleep with you, Liyema," she said softly.

Liyema: "Okay," I said and moved closer to her slowly. I helped her put the shirt back on properly.

Ntombi: "I have to go," she was about to stand but I held her and stopped her from getting up. I hugged her from the back while we were both still sitting. She did

not move. I planted a soft kiss at the back of her neck. She turned her head to look at me. I hated that she had tears in her eyes.

"I'm not going to sleep with you, Liyema," she added in a whisper.

Liyema: "And that's okay. I'm sorry for allowing the kiss to get out of control,"

Ntombi: "I allowed my flesh to control me. It's not your fault. I have to go," she wiped her tears off.

Liyema: "Please stay. I will go ask if they have a room available so

I'd sleep in it. Just...just stay.," I pleaded.

Ntombi: "Is that why you allowed me to see them. Because you wanted to sleep with me?" I felt offended by her question.

Liyema: "No," I said. "I'm not after sex Ntombi. I...I want you. I'm in love with you," I confessed. I expected her to get out of my arms, get dressed and walk out but she started to cry more instead. I was not sure what to do so I let her show me what she wanted me to do. She was sitting on the edge of the couch and that

could not have been comfortable. I let go of her and got away from behind her. She sat back and hid her face in the shirt with her knees against her chest. I'm not good at comforting someone. I wish she could tell me what to do. Should I stand and go find another room? I decided to try and comfort her. I put my arm around her and moved closer. She put her arms around my waist and continued to cry. I hated each moment she spent crying. I hated that I started everything by kissing her and by saying I love her. I opened the flood gates of

her tears by my actions. She stopped crying but still buried her face in my neck. She breathed hot air onto my neck. There was silence for a long while. She finally looked up. She put her head on the couch while looking at me, I turned my body to face her and look at her. Her eyes were red. We made prolonged eye contact without saying a word. It was as though she was trying to look into my soul.

Liyema: "Hi," I said softly.

Ntombi: "Hi," she replied.

Liyema: "I'm sorry," I said still looking into her cried out eyes.

Ntombi: "I don't want a relationship, Liyema. Especially not with you," her words crushed my spirit. "Next thing you will be trying to control me by using the boys knowi..."

Liyema: "Why do I get the feeling that you're comparing me to your ex? I'm not the best person there is Ntombi but don't compare me to scum please," I cut her short.

Ntombi: "I'm sorry that was unfair of me," she looking down.

Liyema: "Is it me you don't want or are you just afraid of being loved right?" she looked at me again.

Ntombi: "It...it's you I don't want," she said in a whisper.

Liyema: "Cool. I think it's best I get another room. I'm tired and they wake up early. I'm sorry for tonight. None of what happened between us should have happened. It was a moment of weakness from both of us and I think spending time with you made me believe I've developed feelings for you. We just need rest

and yeah uhm...goodnight," I said in a sad low tone.

Ntombi: "Night and I'm sorry," she looked at me

I walked out filled with regret. What was I thinking? I went to the receptionist and luckily they had an available room. I just peaked through their door to tell her I got a door and left to go there. I took my pants off and got into bed. I hated that she compared me to that thing she called a boyfriend. Control her using the boys? In what way would I control her using the boys. I know she would do

anything for them but I would not ask her to sell her soul to prove it. If that is what she is used to then she will not get it from me. Does she think I'll give her ultimatums like "you see the boys only when you agree to have sex with me"? Did that bastard make her do such? Could he have forced himself on her at some point? My mind was filled with questions I could not go ask Ntombi. I was mad at her, not for turning me down but for seeing me through the lenses she saw that pig. After a while I calmed down and tried to

understand where she came from. Her rejection did not go in well but I understand. She has a lot going on in her life right now. From therapy, to school and now the kids. But she did say she does not want to be with me. I guess the kiss made me think she does but it was a moment of physical weakness. She has not been with a man in a long time I guess, so it's only normal for her body to get a bit excited. I just hope things won't be awkward between us. We have made so much progress. I don't regret today. It was the best birthday

I have had since Lulongke's death. I just regret kissing Ntombi and telling her I love her but at least now I'm sure that she does not want me. Life goes on. I'll meet someone someday but until then I'll focus on my kids and business. Ntombi is too young anyway.

THIRTY EIGHT

NTOMBI

The moment of weakness Liyema and I had a few days ago has made me wonder if I should go to

Cape Town or not. We have not spoken about it since it happened. When they left for Cape Town things were awkward. I don't think Liyema loves me. I think he loves the idea of me. I decided to go to Cape Town. I want to be there when they celebrate their first birthday party. I want to make memories with them and be reminded of them when I look at the pictures that we will take. I'm sure Liyema has forgotten about that night. I don't know why I allowed it to get so far. The way he kissed and touched me was so foreign to me. I loved

the feeling but I could not let it go on. I still don't think we can make a relationship work. Men like him like independent women who wear expensive clothes and perfume. All I can afford is a R20 spray bottle that's if I have money for it at all. I buy clothes that every other girl at varsity has because I can't afford exclusive boutique clothes. I accidentally spent most of the money I had saved up on gifts for the boys. I went into the toy store and went crazy. The money to go to Cape Town was not enough for a bus ticket and

definitely not enough for a plane ticket. My Friday test got postponed which was music to my ears. I couldn't really study after what happened. All I could think about was Liyema. Xoli says I'm denying my feelings for him but I don't feel I am. She also said I should ask Liyema for money for a ticket and that was not a good idea. I also did not want to bother my family. Xoli then suggested I hike to Cape Town. I have never hitchhiked in my life but it seems I've got no option. Xoli put a post on her Facebook page asking if anyone was going

to Cape Town from Port Elizabeth early on Friday morning. A lady replied saying she was going to Cape Town at about 8am. Xoli reserved a seat for me and the price was within my budget. I'm glad I didn't have to go stand by the side of the road holding a thumbs up. Social media has become really helpful. I'm glad it was a lady who was going to give me a lift. I packed my bags Thursday night. I can't wait to see my little ones.

Morning came and the lady indeed picked me up at the spot we agreed upon in town. She had two

other people in the car, a man and woman. They looked like a couple. They got off in Mosselbay. Nomsa and I had a great chat on the way. She received a call saying that she had to go to Durbanville urgently and also had to drop me off there. My heart started to race because I didn't know Durbanville. I could see that she had a real emergency so I asked her to drop me at a place where I could find the taxi to Cape Town. She dropped me off at a place that seemed safe. I couldn't find a taxi and the private cars were too expensive. I sat with

bags filled with toys and feared someone might take my bags so I clung to them. The place had mostly white people and they couldn't help me. I felt scared. I was in a place I had never been and no one could help me. I checked my phone battery and it was at 8%. I decided to swallow my pride and call Liyema. He answered after a few rings. I told him what happened and he was not happy that I chose to hike instead of ask him for help. I told him where I was and while describing my surrounding my phone died. Tears rolled down my

cheeks freely. I clung to my bags like my life depended on it. It was starting to get dark and my anxiety level went up the roof. I regretted hitchhiking. I wish I had asked Nomisa to take me with to wherever she went but I couldn't bother her after she gave me a lift for little money. A few minutes went by and it felt like forever. After about 20 minutes of hopelessness Liyema showed up. It was a bit dark but I recognize them from anywhere. He was looking around and when he finally spotted me he ran to me and gave me a hug. I

have never in my life been so happy to see him. I clung to him like no other. He looked at me with concern and realized I'm fine, just a bit shaken. Liyema: "Shit, Ntombi don't do anything like this again," he said while picking up my bags. The two of us walked to the car. He looked upset. I'm sure I interrupted him while he was busy at with something important. He put the bags into the boot and came into the cars. Ntombi: "I'm sorry, Liyema," I said quietly. Liyema: "Do you realise how dangerous these streets are, Ntombi yet you

went and got into some stranger's car for eight long hours," he looked at me. Ntombi: "I didn't stand by the road. Xoli put out a post on Facebook and the driver was a lady," Liyema: "How does that make things any better? These human traffickers sometimes use women to lure other women. This is a cold world, Ntombi. I don't care how the heck you got the damn lift but that shit is not safe," he raised his voice. Ntombi: "I'm sorry for bothering you," I started to cry. He exhaled loudly, clearly annoyed. Liyema: "You don't get the point

do you? You didn't bother me, Ntombi. You scared me shitless. Do you know the things that came to mind when you heard you're here alone when it was almost dark? You know that...let us just go home," he said she the car started to move. I was crying silently because I was relieved and because he shouted at me. I decided not to say things that might anger him more. We first went to his work because he was there before coming to me. Liyema: "I won't be long. I'll just get my stuff. Will you be okay on your own for a few minutes," she asked and

I nodded. "Ntombi, I'm sorry for shouting at you. I should not have done that. I was...I feared something bad would happen to you. I don't even know how I managed to get there safely with the speed I drove in," he said softly. "I'm sorry and I'll be back now. You can charge your phone if you want," he said before disappearing inside the big office building. The sound of his voice told me that he really was afraid that something would happen to me. I felt so bad. He was right, so many bad things could have happened to me. I can't believe

that he left his work and drove at an unlawful speed to get to me. No man has ever cared so much. No man had put me above anything else. I'm not sure how to feel about him showing me so much care. I understood why he shouted. He was letting his emotions out. I charged my phone to call Xoli and tell her I've arrived. I didn't tell her the entire story. Liyema took about an hour before we drove to his place. I apologized again in he accepted my apology. By the time we arrived the boys were already sleeping. I kissed each one of

them. I wanted to wake them but they will need energy for their party tomorrow. I asked Liyema if it was okay if I took a shower. He said I should make myself at home. He took my bags to the bedroom I occupied when I was there the last time. I took a long, hot shower. I put on my pyjamas and gown when I was done. I found him in the kitchen warming up food. Liyema:

"Leftovers...I hope you don't mind," he looked at me. Ntombi: "I have not eaten since this morning so I'd eat anything right now," I laughed softly. Liyema: "Why do

you do this, Ntombi? You make me feel like I'm this cold, unapproachable monster sometimes. Is accepting my help such a pain?", he asked in a sad tone. Ntombi: "I don't want to depend on a man again. It gives the man power over me," Liyema: "I'm not him. I want you here because having you here makes our children happy. When they are happy, I'm happy. What would I have said to them had something happened to you today? I can't lose you," he said while dishing out the food. Ntombi: "I know I did something reckless. I'm sorry once

again. I just wanted to lessen your load, Liyema. I'm in PE living like I'm not a mother of four babies while you take care of them in every way. I feel guilty. I don't want to be in your way. I've spent my life trying to not be a burden to those around me because most made me feel like one. I just don't want to be a burden to you to a point where you get tired of me," I cried. I hated that I cried so much. My crying made him uncomfortable. He gave me my plate and looked at me. Liyema: "The day you stop comparing me to those people who

made you feel like a burden, will be the day you realize that I've never seen you as one. Our lives will become so much easier after that. You're not sitting at home being in couch potato looking to marry a rich man, Ntombi. You're a student trying to better your life for your family and our children. I don't mind taking on more responsibility because of know someday you'll be able to help me. Please let us not compare what the other does for the children. I can take care of them and I have the means to bring you here to see them. You're not a

burden," he said calmly. Ntombi: "I hear you and you're right. I'll be more accepting of your help. I had enough money to come. I just went overboard with the prezzies," he laughed softly.

Liyema: "Mma uses that same excuse when she buys them too many things," Ntombi: "It's not an excuse. I went in there going to buy rhino stuffed toys but all the other toys just grabbed my attention too...it was like they were calling my name," he laughed.

Liyema: "Yeah right. Let's eat so we can go to bed," Ntombi: "I can not believe that you left a

meeting with a client you were trying to get for a year to get to me. Thank you," Liyema: "Some things are more important than others," he put a spoonful of food in his mouth. Ntombi: "I'm important to you?", we looked at each other and he nodded. I smiled. "That is sweet," Liyema: "Don't get all soppy with me. But for real though, Ntombi. Don't do that again," Ntombi: "I promise I won't. I was so scared," Liyema: "I was too," we made prolonged eye contact. "I know you hoped to find them awake. I had to put out fires by explaining why

I ran out of an important meeting to the potential client and my team," Ntombi: "Did you manage to get him to do business with you?" Liyema: "I'll know soon but now I need to prepare myself mentally for tomorrow. Mma invited everyone she knows who had kids," he put his hand on his face. Ntombi: "I'm sure she went overboard. Isn't it weird that we are their parents yet we didn't have a say in what should be happening at the party?" we both laughed. Liyema: "I'm sure even if it was our wedding she'd have taken over," he said and

things became a bit awkward.

"Not saying it will happen...just trying to make you realize how bad Mma can be," he laughed awkwardly. Ntombi: "Would

you...ever get married again?"

Liyema: "Had you asked me that a few months ago I'd have said hell no but now I think I'd like to but for the right reasons this time,"

Ntombi: "What would those right reasons be?" Liyema: "Meeting

the right woman whom I want to grow old with. A woman who will love my boys as much as I do. Someone I can built a life with. Someone...someone who will not

judge certain things I'll share with them. Who will accept me as I am," he looked at me. "And you, do you think you'll ever get married?" Ntombi: "I don't know," I shrugged. Liyema: "How long will you allow this man to control your life?" he asked a question I did not expect. Ntombi: "He is not controlling my life," Liyema: "Then why are you afraid of love?" Ntombi: "I'm not afraid of love, Liyema. I'm afraid of receiving the wrong kind of love again," Liyema: "How will you know if a man has the right kind of love to offer when you won't let go of

your fear?" Ntombi: "I don't know. I guess I don't allow myself to find out," Liyema: "Are you afraid of me?" I looked at him. Ntombi: "I'm not afraid of you. I just wish you'd stop shouting at me as though I'm a child when I don't do things the way you like. I know I'm younger than you but it does not give you any right," I said and he looked down. Liyema: "You're absolutely right. I know I'm not patient and that weakness gets the better of me. I won't shout at you again but on moments when I do then stop me. I'm sorry. I'm just a very structured

man and I prefer things a certain way. You on the other hand," he looked at me and smiled. Ntombi: "I annoy you," I laughed softly. Liyema: "That was not what I was going to say. I was going to say you're my opposite. You don't mind things being out of order and messy," Ntombi: "And it annoys you," we both laughed. Liyema: "Your words... You can go to bed if you want. I'll put these in the dishwasher," Ntombi: "It's only two plates and a few plastic containers. We can wash them by hand," I shook my head. Liyema: "But I'm tired," he sulked. I

managed to get his bum off the share and to the sink. He washed while I dried. I expected things to be awkward but it seems that night really was just a moment of weakness. He put some foam on my hair and I sprinkled water in his face. I love these silly moments. He loosens up a bit and became playful. After playing with foam and water making extra work for ourselves we decided to call it a night. Tomorrow will be a long day. LIYEMA when Ntombi called telling me she was stranded in a town she didn't know I flipped out. The sound of fear in

her voice was the worst part. At least when her phone died she had already told me her whereabouts. I knew Durbanville because it is basically a part of Cape Town. I'm sure the traffic cameras caught me speeding a few times but it was all worth it. The mother of my children was alone and afraid. I'm going to choose her and our boys over a multi million rand account anyday. Even if the client doesn't sign with us, I will have no regrets. The relief I felt when she was in my arms, safe was indescribable. I hope she'll never do something

so stupid again. There are sick and twisted people out there. I shudder when I think about what could have happened. I will stop shouting at her, or at least try my best not to. I don't want to remind her of her coward of an ex because if he could beat her, I'm sure he shouted and swore at her too. I'm glad she did bring what happened Monday up. It would have ruined things. Morning came too soon. I checked the time and realized I got a few extra hours of sleep. I found Ntombi sitting with the boys in the lounge. Each had a bottle in their

mouth and mommy a cup of coffee. They were watching cartoons. No one even turned their head to show they are happy to see me. Ntombi sat between them. All five of them sat with their legs open and stretched out. It was a beautiful sight. One I wish I could wake up to every morning. I greeted but the boys did not bother themselves. Liyema: "Oh is that how you four chose to act when mommy is around?" I said and Ntombi laughed. Ntombi: "That's because you're always in their faces. I give them time to miss

me. Absence makes the heart grow fonder," she said with a smile. Liyema: "Whatever baby attention snatcher," she laughed out loud. "Have you guys eaten?" Ntombi: "They ate already. Pat is outside making a call, she helped me feed them," Liyema: "Why have you not eaten anything?," Ntombi: "I was waiting for you to make me pancakes," she smiled. Liyema: "I don't want to," I joked. Ntombi: "Oh come on put a smile on my face," she pleaded. Liyema: "Nope," I said while walking to the kitchen. I don't know who I was trying to fool by

saying no because I knew I would make the damn pancakes. She followed me to the kitchen and found me making her special order. If pancakes made her smile all the time, I'd have opened a pancake place just for her. I served breakfast for Ntombi myself and Pat. The boys would not let us eat in peace because they wanted some. One would swear they didn't have breakfast. Mma called and said everything is in order. I allowed her to go crazy with their party because I know she wants to do more than her friends have for

their grandchildren. I don't understand the competition and I won't try to, it must be a woman thing. Hours went by and the six of us were soon at my parents house. Ntombi seems uncomfortable around my father. I'm sure it's his serious face that intimidates her. Mma had jumping castles, a guy that made shapes from balloons the works. The children and their parents started to arrive and it was soon a great celebration. If I did not know better I'd have thought Ntombi was a part of the entertainment people. Kids loved

her. The boys enjoyed having other children around. Some were friends from church. Lungile brought his girlfriend because he knew our parents would not have time to interrogate her, smart move. The day went well until Zingisa showed up. Mma didn't want to cause a scene so she let her stay. I'm glad I went to therapy because her presence didn't phase me at all. Zingi: "They look beautiful. I came with a friend and her kids. She insisted that the I come," she said with a smile. Liyema: "Good, enjoy. Like you see my hands are

full. I need to get these party packs over there," I was about to walk but she held my arm.

Ntombi looked at us and I did not like being touched by another woman while she was watching.

Mma: "Hey, hey. I don't know why you are here but I'm warning you.

If you dare ruin my grand babies celebration you'll see what I'm capable of," she said softly. Zingzi:

"Mma, I'm..." Mma: "Dying "Mma"

me. I'm nothing to you. Now find a corner and hide in it like the dirty rat that you are," she

walked away. Zingzi: "You're not

even going to try to defend me?"

Liyema: "The mother of my children is waiting for me to give her these. Enjoy the day and thanks for coming," I left her standing there. Who the hell does she think I am, her bodyguard? I took the extra party packs to Ntombi and walked behind her while she handed them to the children that have not gotten any. Mma had a cake baked for each boy which was unnecessary. After we sang for them and helped them blow their candles there was cake everywhere. On the grass, the table, on me and Ntombi and all over their faces

and they loved the mess. Hours went by, everyone was exhausted and most the guests went home but some remained. We thanked Mma for what she has done. She said it was only a pleasure. I found Ntombi in the kitchen indulging in a big slice of cake. One would swear she stole it the way she was eating it. Liyema: "What are you doing?" I said in a strange voice. I startled her. Ntombi: "Stop it. I put this piece away deep in the fridge because I knew there would be non left," Liyema: "And you did not hide a slice for me? In that case I

want some of yours," she looked at me. Ntombi: "Some of my what?" Liyema: "Your cake," Ntombi: "My what?" she laughed and I remembered that some people refer to a woman's privates as "cake". Liyema: "Sies, Ntombi we are at a kiddies party and you make kinky jokes," we both laughed. "Now please give me a bite of your sweet, delicious, chocolate cake," she laughed harder. Ntombi: "No, I don't want to," I walked closer to her and tried to take a bite but she refused. I held her by her waistline so she'd remain still.

Most of the icing landed on the floor and some on her nose. She was not happy with me but allowed me to bite off a piece. I wiped the icing on her nose with my thumb and licked it off. She said it was gross because she sweated but I didn't think so. I held her closer and kissed her once again after claiming the first time was a mistake. She kissed me back. Someone cleared their throat and forced us to part our lips. It was Zingisa saying that she was looking for her friend. She left us alone again and I focused on the beauty I held in

my arms. Ntombi: "Who is she? I saw your mother giving her cold stares all day," Liyema: "My ex wife." she looked down. Ntombi: "She is beautiful," she said softly. Liyema: "I don't want to talk about her. I want to talk about us. I love, Ntombi. I've tried to hide it but I can't. I want to be with you," I said without regret. Ntombi: "What if we mess our relationship up and then end up being bitter exes fighting over the boys?" Liyema: "What if we grow closer and are able to give them a stable home?" Ntombi: "What if you want more kids in

future?" Liyema: "I'm content, baby. Our four are more than enough," Ntombi: "What if I don't have sex with you while we are in a relationship? I don't want to sleep with another man until I'm married, Liyema," Liyema: "Then marry me then," I kissed her she laughed. Ntombi: "No. Do you know what they people say no couple gets married faster than a horny Christian couple," we both laughed. Liyema: "I have not heard that and I hope no couple gets married because they are horny. Just give me a chance to show you what love really is. I

don't mind the no sex because I've been without it for long anyway," Ntombi: "I'm scared, Liyema," she said softly. Liyema: "Me too but we will take things slow. I just want to prove to you that love can be safe and beautiful," I kissed her. She kept quiet. Our foreheads were touching. I waited for her answer anxiously. Zingzi: "Oh Liyema, I have just come to remind you to not forget your pills but I'm sure your girlfriend has already since you've told her that you're HIV positive," she said while standing at the door I have never

thought of being violent to a woman but in that moment all I wanted to do was strangle Zingisa. She walked out leaving Ntombi looking at me in shock. She looked at me from head to toe as though she wanted to see proof that I'm really HIV positive. She asked me if it was true and I nodded. It felt like my entire life came crashing down. The look of shock and uncertainty in her eyes could not be avoided. This was not how I wanted her to find out. I'll deal with Zingisa and she will regret it but for now all I wanted was for Ntombi to

say something. Why wouldn't she say something, anything?

THIRTY NINE

NTOMBI

I can't believe how mean and cold Liyema's ex is. To just say something like this. Who the hell does she think she is? Just because she puts on expensive weaves and clothes it gives her no right to go around spreading lies about her ex husband. I've heard about bitter exes but she takes things to a totally new

level and that on the day we celebrate our children. My first instincts were to run out and leave Liyema with his ex but I thought how childish that would have been. I waited until she left. I didn't know what to say to Liyema. My mouth felt dry. I guess it's because I had it open all this time. There was suddenly chaos in the kitchen. Mrs E came in with the boys because she claimed they missed us. Lungile came in and it was a total mess. Liyema and I both gave our attention to the distractions that showed just when I was

about to ask what that was about. The poor man looked flushed. After all these little moments of being alone, laughing and kissing I think I might also have feelings for him. I'm scared though. I hear him promise the right love but at some point so did my ex. And to joke about getting married like that. Who gets married to someone they have not even been in a relationship with? That only happens in arranged marriages. It seemed the more desperate I was to talk to him alone, the more people around us made sure

we weren't alone. We went home feeling exhausted after many hours. The boys did not show any signs of wanting to sleep either. Why won't anyone allow us to speak about what happened earlier on? We bathed the boys and they finally retired for the night. I found Liyema still sitting on the floor where I left him when I went to go look for my phone. He was clearly deep in thought. I sat next to him and didn't say a word at first. I was hoping he would explain why his ex wife said such a mean thing but he didn't say a word either.

Ntombi: "Are you okay?," I asked softly. He turned to look at me and shook his head slowly. "

Liyema: "I don't know what that woman wants from me. She was not happy when she was married with me and proved it by sleeping around yet she is not happy without me either," he scratched his head. Ntombi: "Maybe she was hoping that you'd be miserable without her. Perhaps seeing you happy with the boys and...and with me...it gets to her. She and my ex were clearly cut from the same cloth," he looked at me.

Liyema: "It's true. What she said

about my status is true. I'm HIV positive," he said while looking at me. I thought he would say she was lying to stir up trouble between us. I looked at the black TV screen in front of us not knowing what to say. "Please say something, Ntombikayise," he added. Ntombi: "Uhm...I don't know what to say. I thought...wow," I was lost for words. I was shocked. Liyema: "Do you see me differently now that you know?," he asked. Do I? Ntombi: "I don't know. I'm still taking in that you're...uhm..." Liyema: "HIV positive. You can

say its okay," he looked at the blank TV too. I turned to look at him to see if I "saw" him differently now. He was still the handsome man with the serious expression I know. The man I suspect I'm in love with. I don't know what being in love felt like anyone. All I know is I love being with him. I feel safe with him. I laugh with him and perhaps even love him. If I'm in love I'm not sure yet. I decided to be understanding and as mature as I possibly could about the situation at hand. I still can't put his name and HIV in one

sentence but I was not going to be a drama queen about it.

Ntombi: "Thank you for telling me the truth. You could have lied and said she's just a bitter ex spreading rumours about you but you did not. I appreciate that.

I'm not sure what to say or how to react, Liyema not because I'm disgusted by you or something like that. I'm just shocked and I guess sad," he looked at me.

Liyema: "I understand. I didn't ask for this, Ntombi. I've accepted it because there is nothing I can do about it but I did not go and ask for it," he said

in a whisper. Ntombi: "Do you know how you got it?" Liyema: "From my ex wife. I told you about how she used to cheat. She just did not care enough about me to at least use protection with these men," he said calmly. How could he be so calm when talking about it? Ntombi: "I thought it was one man," I said regretting it later. Liyema: "At first it was one man. She said it was just a kiss. I forgave that because we can all fall into temptation. Then later I found out she slept with him. Took a long time but I forgave that because she claimed

it happened once. I should have walked away then but I didn't want to disappoint my father. The last straw was when she thought I'm away on business. Well I was but came back early. I found her in bed having a threesome with two other men. I've never been so disgusted in my life, Ntombi. I remember throwing up outside when I walked out. To see my wife sandwiched between two men like some cheap whore is a thing I would not wish my worst enemy to see. After that I found that she had been cheating with a few

others and perhaps even had more orgies. That's how I got infected," he looked at me and tears were rolling down his cheeks. He would wipe them off but more would flow down. I started to cry to. Ntombi: "I'm sorry that you were betrayed by someone that you love like that. Some people are just cruel," I said and wiped my tears off. I moved closer to him so I could hug him. He broke down. Not the little shedding tears here and there. He was shaking, he gripped me so tightly and my heart broke. He got himself out of my grip and ran

upstairs. I was not surprised that he did that. Liyema is a man who doesn't like showing emotions. He wants to be the strong one all the time. I walked up to his room but found the door locked. I decided not to nag him by shouting that he must open his door. I went to check on the boys who had no care in the world. They were sleeping peacefully. I'm not informed about HIV. I'm a girl from the rural areas and when I was in Cape Town I was locked up in the house to care about such things. Even now that I'm at school, I never had reason

to read up on HIV. I'm now faced with the reality of the father of my children being HIV positive. I know one can't get it from kissing so I was not worried but that is as far as it goes. It explains why he freaked out when he thought we had unprotected sex, he feared that he might have infected me. I was not sure what he meant by they could prevent it. I went to my room to read up on the virus. I ran out of data just when the article was busy loading. I decided to sleep or rather try. How could I sleep when Liyema was not okay? The

boys will pick up on it and become cranky. I have to make sure we talk before they wake up but I don't know how I'll get into his room when it's locked. The silence inside his room worried me. My mind thought about all kinds of things. I took comfort in the knowledge that he loved his kids and wants to be around to see them grow up so he wouldn't take his own life. LIYEMA I was going to deal with Zingisa. I'll first start by making her lose her job. It seems her father cut her off because the car she is driving is a downgrade to what she used to

drive when we were married. I'll make sure she ends up with nothing. I will do all of that once the awkwardness between Ntombi and I has stopped. I hated crying while she was there. I hated that I showed such weakness. What kind of a man does she think I am now? I had to leave her to just cry alone. I was not crying because of the past. I was crying because the woman that I love had to hear such a thing like that. I hated talking about Zingisa to her because I don't want to make her think my ex still has a hold on me.

At last I don't repulse her because she touched me. Listening to her softly begging me to open the door broke me. I hated that she was a part of this. I hated that she is forced to accept this. I'm sure I stand no chance with her now. I have locked myself in my room for the entire morning. Ntombi knocked to tell me she made breakfast but I did not open. How childish of me? I even had my pill on an empty stomach. I missed them but it was better that I stay away. The boys will feel the tension. I was hungry as hell. We also won't be going to

church. I was busy on my laptop when I heard a knock. I ignored whoever it was. Ntombi: "Liyema please just open up," she pleaded but I kept quiet. "Well if you've killed yourself at least open before your body rots and stink up the whole house," she laughed and I couldn't help but do too. I stood from my bed and went to open. She looked at relieved to see me. Liyema: "How on earth would I have been able to open if I was dead?" she laughed. "We have a suicide crisis in our country, don't joke about it," Ntombi: "My joke got you to open, didn't it? At

least you brushed your teeth," she stood closer to my mouth to smell. Liyema: "Wow," I shook my head and laughed softly. I walked in and threw myself on my messy bed. She followed me holding a tray. Ntombi: "You did not even come down for breakfast. I cooked lunch, fed the kids, ate with their nannies but still no daddy. Here I your lunch," she pushed the tray closer to me. The food was hot and smelled amazing. I ate five full spoons first and took a huge bite of the meat. This woman can cook. She looked at me and that was when

I realized I was rushing. I was too hungry to eat slowly. "The ladies too the boys out to the back to play. I thought we could use the time to talk," she added. Liyema: "I thought we talked," I stopped eating and looked at her. Ntombi: "Nope, you ran to your room and held yourself prisoner until now remember?" Liyema: "I don't have anything to say, Ntombi. I said everything last night. You said you needed time to process things and I don't want to be in your face while you do that," I continued to eat. Ntombi: "I've processed it. You're HIV

positive. Now educated me on it," I looked at her, she did not even blink while looking at me. Liyema: "What?," I asked. Ntombi: "I don't know much about it. I tried to Google it but ran out of data," Liyema: "I've got WI-Fi," she raised her right brow. Ntombi: "I don't know your password," she mumbled. Liyema: "Since when?" Ntombi: "No man, Liyema. Stop trying to change the subject. I forgot about your wi-Fi because I was too worried about you for my brain to function properly. Just educate me on this already," she said in a sulking voice. She looked

cute. I leaned forward to kiss her. I thought she would push me away but instead her head moved closer to mine. It was not a lustful, passionate kiss. Our lips just met and did not move. I looked into her eyes and nothing else mattered. She placed both her warm hand on my cheeks and planted a soft kiss on my lips. If loving someone feels like this then I never wanted the feeling to stop. Liyema: "Firstly I love you...thank you for not packing your bags and leaving when I told you. To be honest it's what I thought you'd do but I'm glad I

was wrong. Secondly I'd be more than happy to educate you about HIV. I'll start by saying that my CD4 count is very high and my viral load is low," I said. Ntombi: "Is that good?...What does it mean?" Liyema: "It means my immune system is healthy and the virus is almost undetectable because the treatment is working," we still did not break eye contact. Her face is so close to me I could feel her warm breath on my face. Ntombi: "Okay that sounds good. So you won't die right?" I smiled. Liyema: "Should I die now, I'm sure it will have

nothing to do with my status. I'm not taking my health for granted, Ntombi. I eat right. I no longer go gym as much but I exercise when I have time. I've stopped drinking. I've decided to make the best of a worse situation," Ntombi: "I'm proud of you. I don't think I would have handled it as you have. Do you hate her?...this Zingisa woman," Liyema: "I used to but now I feel sorry for her, especially after yesterday. I've got too much to be grateful for to be hating on people who aren't important in my life. I hope she gets help. I know

it sounds like too perfect of an answer but I mean it, especially now that you're asking me questions about the virus because you want to be informed about it. Maybe my hate for her would have started had you hated me for being HIV positive. I've even decided to waste my time revenging on her," I said truthfully. Zingisa suddenly did not matter. I told her more about HIV/Aids and she asked a lot of questions that I was too happy to answer. I honestly didn't expect her to be so mature about the whole thing. Ntombi:

"Have you had sex with anyone after you found out?" I nodded. Liyema: "I ended up over thinking the situation though so did not really enjoy the experience. I feared the condom would break but it never did. I guess the fear of infecting the other person becomes too much," Ntombi: "But that has not happened. What now? I mean with everything that happened between us. What now?" Liyema: "That's up to you. I know what I want and that is to be with you than more than friends and co-parents. I know you are scared and I can only

imagine your fear to be worse now that you've heard about my status," Ntombi: "It actually does not scare me. I was not well informed but I was not about to keep my distance from you out of fear of you infecting me. And I trust the information you've just given me," Liyema: "So what now?" I looked at her. Ntombi: "Do you promise to not hurt me, Liyema?" her eyes teared up. Liyema: "There are things both of us will say and do that will make the other hurt the other unintentionally. That's how relationships work. But we will

work on talking about it and respecting each others feeling by acknowledging that we hurt each other," I wiped her tears with my fingers. "But I promise I will never choose to hurt you. I will never go out of my way to cause you pain. All I ask is that you not compare me to him please," I pleaded. Ntombi: "I don't mean to do that. I don't know why I do it. I'll try by all means to stop. I just have very high walls and they refuse to break down," Liyema: "I was champion mountain climber in high school so I can climb them," we both

laughed. Ntombu: "They are super high, Liyema: "I'm super tall so I take long strides while climbing," she put her forehead against mine and laughed softly. I know she's a guarded girl. I noticed that about her when we met the first time. I'm not a patient man but I'll be patient for her.

Ntombi: "What about the distance?" Liyema: "You're here now and we can make a plan for you to come every weekend. Just not by hitchhiking," Ntombi: "You'll tell me honestly when you won't be able to afford a ticket?" I nodded. "What about the

difference in our statuses. I mean you are a man who comes from a wealthy family. I don't know your net worth but I know you don't get broke. I grew up poor and I have a net worth of R10," we both laughed. I thought by statuses she meant her being negative and me positive not this useless crap she just said but I'm not going to just brush off her concerns. Liyema: "I've dated women from wealthier families who have trust funds that requires them to never work in their lives but non have given me what you had. Aside from the

boys, you have given me your patience, your time, your forgiveness even I did not deserve it after I've treated you like crap. Truth is I'm the one who doesn't deserve you yet here you are in my house making it feel like home," Ntombi: "But I don't want to embarrass you. You're always in your suits and there I'll be with my jeans and colourful tops with flip flops," I laughed. Liyema: "I love how your jeans fit on you, woman," she blushed. Ntombi: "I have stretchmarks," Liyema: "Are you really going to dish out all the excuses in the

book? I'd have been shocked had you not had any. That would have been pure witchcraft after you had to carry so many people in your womb," she laughed out loud. Ntombi: "Wanna see them? They look like like noodles so I just want to prepare you because I know you don't eat noodles," we both laughed. Liyema: "Let me see, maybe I'll be a fan of noodles after I've seen yours," she lifted her top up to reveal the white marks on her belly. They are all there because she was giving life to my boys. Why would I hate any part of the body that gave my

boys life? In fact I wanted to see more. Ntombi is such a carefree person. I've never had a woman offer to show me her body flaws but I loved it and her. I put the tray between us aside and grabbed her thigh to pull her to me. I laid her on her back and kissed her. I went down to kiss her nipples too. Liyema: "I think nipples have just become my favorite food," she laughed. "I love your smile," Ntombi: "Stop being cheesy. So we're doing this?", he wrapped her legs around my waist. I got turned on though we were both fully

clothed. Liyema: "Sex?" Ntombi: "No," she blushed. "I meant give us a try. Get your mind out of the gutter," Liyema: "I can't when your inner thighs feel so warm," she covered her face with her hands and laughed. How can a man like be so lucky to have such a woman? "Yeah I think we're doing this," she looked at me. Ntombi: "I thought you said you can do the whole no sex things yet..." Liyema: I didn't have a beautiful woman to tempt me back then so it'll be a bit difficult," she broke eye contact. Ntombi: "If you can't do it, I'll understand. It's

too much to ask from a man," She played with the collar of my T-shirt. I could feel how her heart was racing against my chest.

Liyema: "Waiting won't kill me and I'm not planning on waiting long because I don't think I want to call you my girlfriend for long,"

Ntombi: "Oh," she said quietly. "I understand" Liyema: "That I have intentions of making you my wife?", she looked at me. "I want to grow old with you. I want to build a life with you. You love my boys as much as I do. And you are still here after finding out about my status. I believe those are

enough reasons for me to want to be a husband once again, the right reasons. And yeah also because I'm a horny Christian," we laughed. Ntombi: "You need to take me out on a date first before we can talk marriage. Four kids later but no first date, Ndlovu?", she joked. Liyema: "Four kids and still no damn date? I'm the scum of the earth. I knocked you up four times but still have not taken you out on a date?" she laughed. Ntombi: "Maybe if we did not spend so much time in bed like we are now having sex like rabbits we would have gone on the date,

"she joked and I've never laughed so much. "Let's get up before you knock me up for the fifth time," we laughed. Liyema: "I love you," she didn't answer "You don't have to say it back. Let me take you on that date then we will take it from there," Ntombi: "I love you too, Liyema. I don't need a date to make me say it," she kissed me. Liyema: "So when we do get to the next level of our relationship someday, do you think you'll be comfortable enough to enjoy it without fear?" she looked at me. Ntombi: "I trust that you. I just...never mind," Liyema: "Tell

me. I've come so far with our communication so tell me," Ntombi: "I don't really like doing it,"

Liyema: "Sex?", she nodded. "Babe, you've only had it with one man. A man that didn't even know how to love you. I'm not saying I'm the best but I'm not too bad. Let us worry about that when we cross that bridge, yeah?" she nodded.

There was a knock and the noise at the door. We let whoever was at the door in. The nanny came with the boys saying they were crying for us. We let them in and soon my bed became a playground. Couldn't they have played outside

more? All I wanted was time with their mom. I just wanted to kiss her a few more times. I can't believe that she agreed to give us a chance. I feel like sending Zingi thank you flowers because I didn't know how I'd tell Ntombi about my status. Now she knows and she is not fazed. I'm not sure how she will be when we do get to make love someday. We both might be too afraid to do it but that's worries for another day. For now I want to take her on our first date. I'm still shocked by how she handled the news about my status. She's been so

mature about it. I hate that she will have to go back to Port Elizabeth. I want her next to me. I want to hold her while we fall asleep. The no sex will be a challenge but I've got to be strong. She thinks I'm joking about wanting to marry her. I'm not and I'm even thinking of paying lobola instead of damages but she doesn't seem to want marriage yet. I'll wait until she is. I snapped out of my deep thoughts when I heard something tear, it's my sheet. Suddenly no one, including mommy knew who it was. I scolded at all

four of them and they cried. I understand that Ntombi can't be strict but one of us has to be and I've accepted that I'll be the bad parent while she is the good while. These are boys, we can't both be soft. When they are naughty someone has to put them in line. I don't want kids who think they can do bad and get away with it. The six of us got up to go snack and have some TV time. Ntombi and I still have plenty to talk about and knowing that I'll have to see her board a plane in a few hours crushed me.

I'm sure now I'll cry with the boys.

FORTY

NTOMBI

I don't know when it happened. I can't point out the day I started to fall for him. My feelings were hiding out of fear. But it seems my feelings silently grew anyway. I guess I'll was hoping for him to be the one to make the first move. When he made his feelings clear, it was as though mine that were caged in a little dark prison

of fear suddenly sprung free. My feelings suddenly screamed out loud and I had no choice but to yield to them. I might not know when it happened but I'm certain that I'm madly in love with Liyema Elephant. My tall, dark knight in shining armour. Leaving Cape Town was suddenly the hardest thing ever. Before my flight he made sure it would be difficult for me to want to go back to PE. He booked a ticket for the next week and it has been the longest week of my life. I missed my boys, all five of them. I continued with the video calls

to the boys. It seems their vocabulary grows on a daily basis. They can say Mama and Ta now. After they go to bed Liyema would video call me and we'd have our time. We have been dating for almost a week now and I hated the distance. It was Friday and I had a late flight. I just couldn't wait to get on that plane.

Ntombi: "Dudy, where is my red dress. That is most decent dress and since we're going on our first date tomorrow, I'll wear that," I turned the clothes on my bed upside down trying to find the dress. Dudu: "You mean the one

you made sure you packed first? It's in there trust me," she laughed. "Help me zip this thing then. I can't miss my flight," I sat on my bag top close it. Xoli: "Oh my word, Ntombu. If you don't calm the hell don't I'll scream. It's still early. Here drink this," she gave me her wine filled glass. Ntombi: "I'm so nervous. Look guys I'm shaking. What do people on first dates do?", I breathed in and out. Xoli: "Does Liyema know how dramatic you can be?" we laughed. Dudu: "But seriously though. You have four kids with this man. You've spent

several night at his house but now you're freaked out for a first date?" Ntombi: "You don't understand, Dudu. We didn't conceive the boys naturally. The boys came first and then our feelings for each other second. Most people start with feelings and then babies. Give me the wine, Xoli. I feel like I need the toilet too," they laughed so much. Dudu: "No, the last thing you want is to kiss him with alcohol breath," Xoli: "She needs it clearly. But seriously Ntombi are you really nervous or acting?" she asked. I held out my shaking

hands for them both to see. I'm nervous and excited and I'm letting it get the better of me. Dudu: "Drink the wine, friend. Damn your baby daddy has you hooked. What love potion does he feed you," Ntombi: "I don't know but I don't want him to stop feeding it to me," I smiled. Xoli: "Amen!" she clapped her hands once in disbelief. "Here, Ntombi take a big sip, girl," she gave me the glass. I took it and took the big sip. She also gave me mints for the smell. Dudu: "Ntombi? Miss no man for me?," they laughed. Ntombi: "This man just

came at me when I least expected it. Like its...it's like..."

Xoli: "I'll go get the entire bottle," she went to the kitchen. Dudu: "I did not want to say this in front of Xoli but Nhlanhla and I are dating," she confessed and I congratulated her. She has been crushing on that guy since forever. My friend and I are in love. Our hair cuts attracted positive vibes into our lives. She told me about it and the spark in her eyes. But love though! I decided not to drink more wine. I don't want to be drunk when I get to Cape Town. I've managed

to keep my school work up to date and my marks are good too.

Luckily I have a man who encourages me. I talk as if I've been with Liyema for years but it has not even been a month. He wants me to have that degree as much as I do. Liyema called to check on me before my flight. This man is going on make my heart race until I end up in ER. My friends came with me to say goodbye even though I'll be back in a few days. It felt so I was on the flight for days. There is one thing I've realized about myself and that's that the feel emotions

deeply. When I'm sad I feel it deeply and now I'm happy and I feel it right down to the bone. I know some say I should leave room for disappointment but happiness is something foreign to me and now that I've found it not just in Liyema and the kids but lately in myself too. I've become kinder to myself. Should Liyema decide a relationship is something he does not want anymore I'll be crushed but I'll still be happy. His status honestly does not bother me. Should we have sex someday I know he will protect me. I trust him. I found

him waiting for me at the airport. I literally dropped everything and found myself jumping on him for a hug. It was too much, I know but I was not thinking. People were staring and I thought he'd have a few words about my behavior but instead he smiled and kissed me. Will I ever give him peace? He took my bags and went to the car. Liyema: "Can I please have your proper kiss?" he looked at me. I leaned forward and kissed him. I've missed his lips so much. The kiss lasted for a long while. I didn't want his lips to part from mine but it had to

happen. "I've missed you," he smiled. Ntombi: "I've missed you too, baby. I couldn't wait for the week to be over so I'd have here," I looked at him but he just smiled and kept quiet. "Am I being too much?" I looked down. Liyema: "The week felt long to me too. If it were up to me you'd live here. You're not too much. Don't ever think that again please," we both smiled. He announced that he has a surprise for me and that he sent the boys to his parents. I was actually not upset about it because I loved the thought of us spending time alone together.

We drove to his house and had to shower quickly so go get my surprise. I got dressed in my "decent" dress that would look good alongside his well fitted suits. Only to see him wearing a jean and T-shirt. It was a warm night so I went to change into a short black jumpsuit and put on some heels. I wanted to make some effort. He took me to a very nice restaurant. I liked that it had a casual feeling to it. I don't want to sit in one of those stiff places. We ordered and could not keep our hands off each other. The food was great and the

company even better. Our moment was interrupted by someone calling my name out loudly. We both looked up and Mrs B stood next to us. Mrs B: "What is this, Ntombi?" she asked in a stern voice. I did not know what to say. "Is he making you you do this so you'd see your children?". Liyema wanted to say something but I gave him a subtle signal not to. Ntombi: "I'm not being forced to do anything, Ma. I'm here because I want to be," she looked at me like I'm crazy. Mrs B: "Not so long ago he kept you away from your children. You were

crying your eyes out and even had suicidal thought. My baby, you don't have to allow these men to use and control you. Come home with me, I'll help you fight for your babies," Ntombi: "I appreciate that, Mrs B but it won't be necessary," I looked at her. "Liyema... Liyema is not Bonga. I'm not being controlled nor used," I looked at Liyema. We smiled at each other. Mrs B: "Do your grandparents know you're here with him?" Ntombi: "I don't think they will have a problem with me being with the father of my children, Ma," I said in the

most humble way I could. Mrs B: "Are you sure you're not forced to sleep with him to see them? I know how men can take advantage," she asked softly and sat. Ntombi: "Uhm I've been visiting for a while now, Ma. I'm sorry I did not tell you. I just didn't want someone else making decisions for me. I've been happy, Ma. Liyema and I spoke and put the past behind us. He's allowed me limitless access to the boys. He has even been paying to get me here to see them. Not once were sexual favours demanded from me. We have not...we have

not even taken our relationship to a sexual level. Like I've said, Liyema is not Bonga," she looked at me and then at him. Mrs B: "I will not do anything only because of what you said. Liyema, if you hurt my child again, I swear you'll regret it. I'm sure you know by now that I can use a gun," she pointed at him. Liyema: "I would offer myself to you on a silver platter should I break her heart, Mrs Bam. I have no intention of hurting her. I'm sorry for all the pain I've put her through because I was too angry and filled with pride. I've come to my

senses and I know she is an important part of the children's lives. She is in mine to," he spoke to Mrs B but was looking at me. Mrs B: "Okay I believe you and I see my baby is happy. Just don't visit the city and not come to see me. With Zim married I'm all alone. I'd love to have you and your boys over. What kind of a grandma would I be if I don't even see them?," Ntombi: "We will visit on Sunday after you've come from church. I promise," she smiled. Mrs B: "Why not come to church with me, all of you?" Ntombi: "We're not ready to be

seen together in public yet,"
Liyema: "I don't mind. I mean most of the people from my church have met you at the party. They know you're a part of my life. They don't know how exactly but they know you and who you are to the boys," Ntombi: "I'm not really ready for that. I don't mind going to church because I have not been since I've been traveling almost every weekend but I'm not ready for the questions from those who know you," I said softly. Mrs B: "I understand, my baby. Let me not spoil your night more. Call me. I'll

see you after church for lunch.

You're welcome too, Liyema,"

Liyema: "Thanks, Mrs Bam," he smiled. She kissed my cheek, gave me a hug and left. Ntombi: "I should have told her about me coming here a long time ago. She has done so much for me, "

Liyema: "Someone doing things for you does not mean you owe them your life. She knows you're here and you'll spend time with her Sunday," Ntombi: "You're not mad

at me for not wanting to go with you to church yet?" he kissed me.

Liyema: "Not at all. Now let's enjoy the rest of our night. It's

getting late too. I think we should go home. I want to kiss you without having to care about who is looking," I blushed. He settled the bill and we went home. I was exhausted, we both were. We came home after 11pm so it was too late to call the boys. I got into my pyjamas and joined him in his bed. We were playing with fire by tempting ourselves. I was laying on top of him. I loved having his arms around me. Liyema: "Baby," I looked up. "Thank you for telling Mrs Bam that I'm not him. It felt good to hear it," Ntombi: "You don't see

me through the same lenses you view Zingisa in. You've have not suspended me of cheating on moments when I couldn't answer your calls. When I tell you I'm having extra lesson with Mike, you've never once told me to stop because you feared I'd cheat. So it was not right for me to compare you to Bonga. I don't want to start this off based on the foundation of the relationship with Bonga. I want us to build our own foundation, a strong one," Liyema: "I think it already is. We've come a long way. We communicate better now. We

trust one another so I think we're doing well," Ntombi: "I love you," he smiled. Liyema: "I love you, sthandwa sam. I still can't believe I'm in a relationship. I feel like a teenager again," we both laughed. Ntombi: "I love being in your arms. I feel safe," Liyema: "Because you have safe," We kissed and kissed until we had to stop because I kept on stopping him. I thought he would say its best I sleep in the other room but poor man didn't. We talked until 3am the next day. We've spoken about everything under the sun. It was like talking

to my best friend. I can't believe I was so nervous to see him earlier on. I think all the butterflies in my stomach are causing it. To fall asleep in his arms was the best feeling in the world. LIYEMA I have not spoken to Ntombi about marriage yet, not seriously anyway. She still thinks I'm joking but I'll give it more time. I called her grandfather so I can do right by his child by paying for damages. I feared Mrs Bam would make her change her mind about us but my woman held it down. She had my back and it felt great. She asked

to have the boys go see her father and grandparents and we will make a plan soon. I want them to know her side of the family too. Last night was difficult. The steamy kisses made me want to rip her clothes off and have my way with her but I respect that it's not what she wants. I'll have to get used to cold showers. I opened my eyes and was greeted by her sleeping face. I kissed her soft lips before going to brush my teeth. I went downstairs to go make her breakfast. When I took the tray up I found her on her way going

downstairs. Liyema: "Go back up. This is supposed to be breakfast in bed," I ordered. Ntombi: "But I'm up already," she protested. Liyema: "I can see that and that's why I'm say go back up. Give a man a chance to be romantic," she laughed. She loves laughing a lot. I think Bandile takes after her. Ntombi: "Okay, okay," she ran back to the room. I couldn't run after her. When I got to the room she pretended to have just woken up and acted surprised to see the breakfast in bed. I laughed. I've never laughed as much as I do since

she's come back into my life. We enjoyed the food and of course shared kisses in between. The alarm went off to remind me to take my treatment. She had a lot of questions about it. Mostly worried about the side effects but I told her I don't get any as much as before. It feels so good to take them in front of her. She says I make her feel safe but she makes me feel safe too. I don't have to sneak around when I take my treatment and even if I leave them lying around I won't have to worry. We took a shower separately before going out to

enjoy the warm sun. Mma said she'll look after the kids only if we promise to stay for dinner.

Ntombi asked if my dad will be there. I'm yet to talk to her about her being intimidated by him. I can't have her feel that way. Ntombi might have been in Cape Town for years before moving but she didn't know it well so I took my lady on a tour of the mother city. We had ice cream and enjoyed being childless lovers even if it was for a few hours. While on our walk to nowhere specific, a young white couple approached us. We thought they wanted us to

take pictures of them. Man: "Hi, I'm Jake and this is Lucy. We have an appointment with the marriage official in this building," he pointed at a building behind us. "Our witness could not make it so we were wondering if you'd be our witness? Please we have the rings but no witness," he added. I looked at Ntombi. She smiled and nodded. Liyema: "Okay, I guess we're going to a wedding," Jake: "Thanks, sir," he shook my hand. "Thank you too, mam," he looked at Ntombi. His bride did not look at excited as he is. They led the way in and we followed behind. I

was about to be a witness to a stranger's wedding. How exciting. When we got inside we met a Christian marriage official. They even made some effort to decorate the place for the couple. It seems the official is a good friend of the couple so it would explain why effort was made. Ntombi looked so excited one would swear we were at a grand wedding and part of the bridal and groom party. Well we kinda are but it's different. The ceremony started. Jake was smiling from ear to ear but I still feel like his lady was too nervous.

When it came to exchanging vows Lucy froze. We all froze while waiting for her to speak. Lucy: "I can't do this. I'm sorry. I'm not ready for this. We are rushing into it," she said in a shaky voice.

Jake: "We've been together for nine years, Luc. What do you mean by rushing?" he asked. I felt like we were a part of a movie shoot.

Lucy: "That's the things. I've only been with you. I don't know what it's like to be with someone else. I don't feel the spark anymore. I think we should be with other people and then come back to see if it's what we want.

I'm sorry," she said before running out. Ntombi being an affectionate person went to console Jake who was now crying like a little boy. I stood awkwardly. I just don't know how to react when people cry. My boys are the only people I can comfort when crying and I've learned how to with Ntombi. Poor guy turned pink due to crying. He finally calmed down after a while. He apologized for wasting our time and offered to pay for a date for us. I think both Ntombi and I felt too bad for him to take something from him. I looked at

Ntombi being caring to a complete stranger. Had she not been with me, I would not even had agreed to be a witness. I decided that I don't want to wait. I want the rest of our lives together to start now. Liyema: "There is something you could do for us, Jake," I said to him while looking at Ntombi. She gave me the "really now?" look perhaps thinking I'll accept Jake's money. "I would like for you to be my witness when I marry that beautiful woman over there," I looked at Ntombi whose chest was moving up and down rapidly.

Ntombi: "What?," she asked quietly in a shaking voice. Liyema: "Marry me please," I'm feeling just as petrified as she looks.

Ntombi: "We have only been together for a week, Liyema. Have you lost it?" I smiled and walked closer to her. "Baby," she said softly. Liyema: "You've been thinking that I'm joking whenever I tell you that I want to get married to you but I'm not. I've just witnessed a couple who has been together for years and who clearly love each other break up all because the other wants to explore other people. I

don't want to be with other people, Ntombi. I've been with other people and this is it for me. You're it for me. Do you want to be with other people?" she shook her head and her tears fell freely. "I don't either," I wiped her tears off. Official: I'm sorry for interrupting. I would just like to add to what the lady said about only being together for a week. I've been marrying couples for over 30 years. I've had couple who were together for many year marry only to divorce after a year and I've had couples who were together for just a few months

or weeks even who sent me messages saying they are celebrating over twenty years of marriage. This is a man who is ready to settle down. He has found his best friend. I can see it in his eyes. I'm not saying agree to marry him because he is ready. You must both want this. I'm saying don't let time dictate to you if you're ready or not. We live in a time where time is a precious gift. That is all," the elderly man said. I looked at Ntombi. Ntombi: "I'll be coming into the marriage with nothing, Liyema," Liyema: "That's what partnership is

about. We carry each other, baby. You can finish school she even do your honours after that I won't mind," I held her close. Official: "Have you seen him angry? I'm not talking about breaking his favourite cup angry. I'm talking about his rage, unfiltered anger?" Ntombi: Yes, sir," Official: "And you can still see a future with him after that?" Ntombi: "Yes, sir," she cried more. I kissed her forehead. Official: "Why?" Ntombi: "Because even during the moments when he was angry, I did not fear him. He would apologize and prove it to me with

changed behavior," she sniffed.
Official: "And you, son? Have you seen her angry?" Liyema: "I don't think she has rage inside of her or maybe she has had no reason to bring it out. Thing is I've given her plenty of reason to make me feel the full extent of her rage but it never happened. I've seen her upset, angry and sad but she doesn't lose her cool. If she does one day I'd have done something to deserve it. And when she wrong she is able to humble herself and apologize too. I think that's why we have been able to get through all that

we've gone through. We might only be together for a week but our story runs way deeper. I don't see myself doing life with someone else ever again. I was married before but this is it. I love you," she cried. The elder gave her a tissue. She said she needed to sit down. The three of us waited until she was done crying. She didn't even want me to touch her.

Ntombi: "You'll really not try to stop me from finishing school?"

Liyema: "Never, baby. All I'll ask is that you perhaps move closer as soon as its possible. I'm your biggest fan, Ntombi. I will be

there with our boys on your graduation day cheering like no other. I'll allow you time alone at the house so the boys won't disturb you while you study. By investing in you, I invest in our children," she cried more. She has more tears than I thought.

Ntombi: "I don't want to be with someone else either. I want this to be it for me too. I don't want another woman raising the kids with you. I don't want you to be with another woman either. You promise I'll be safe with you, Liyema," Liyema: "Always, I promise," Jake: Oh come on just do

it already. I heard kids in there and the your one week relationship give my nine year one some shame. After seeing this I'm not settling until find what I see and feel between you two. I'll be honoured to be a witness, man. After this I'll pay for a nice cosy dinner for you two," he said. Not looking like a man who had just had his heart broken. Liyema: "Are we doing this?" she walked closer to me. Her eyes were red. Ntombi: "Our families will kill us but my heart wants this. Let's do this," I lifted her up in a hug. I asked the official and he said I

needn't even ask. Ntombi asked for the bathroom to go get herself proper. She came back looking better than she did while crying. My heart felt like it was going to come out of my mouth. The ceremony started. I couldn't believe that I, Liyema Elephant was taking such a big step without thinking about it much. Jake gave his rings for us to borrow. They were blessed. We said our vows, put on the rings and were husband and wife. I kissed her for dear life. We put our signatures on paper to make it official, official. I believe that

it was meant to be. Of all the people around Jake came to us. Lucy telling him her reasons to not wanting to marry him made us realize that we've been with other people, got treated like trash and didn't want that again. We don't even know our witness. We went in thinking we'll be his witnesses but God had other plans. Ntombi is my gift from God. Our paths crossed for a reason. There was a reason why I didn't do an indepth investigation about her when Wayne suggested her. I would have found out about her and not

have chosen her to be my surrogate. We did not think things through but it feels right. It must feel right for her too or she would have said no. Jake paid for lunch and poor guy even stayed to celebrate with us. It seems we made a new friend. We exchanged numbers before he left us alone. We went home. We are newlyweds. The excitement was beyond words. I did not do anything to initiate sex because I didn't marry her for that. Even if she wants to wait, I'll wait. She excused herself and took a long while to come back. She came back

wearing her gown. She kissed me passionately. I still let her take the lead. She looked at me and told me she's ready. I had to ask a few times if she was sure. Her lips touched mine again. We went up to my room, I mean our room. The kissing once we got inside became so intense. I had lost all senses by then. She took my clothes off. It was then that I started to take the lead. I laid her on the bed and got on top of her. I looked into her dark brown eyes and just took in how beautiful MY WIFE is. She looked at me and smiled. I smiles back

before kissing her again. I wanted to take my time. I wanted her to know that sex with the right person is good. I looked for condoms in my drawer. I had to check the expiry date because I had not used them in a long time. The happiness I felt when I saw they had not expired was beyond words. I turned my focus to loving my wife once again. We were both naked soon. She did not seem to know where to put her hands. Mine were everywhere. From her neck, to her breasts to her inner thigh that were now moist. I kissed my way down her

body. I wanted to taste her but she stopped me before I could reach her love spot. She slid down to face me. Ntombi: "What are you doing?" she looked concerned. Liyema: "Loving you. I want to show love to every part of your body," I kissed her lips. Ntombi: "You don't need to do that, Liyema. I know that men don't like that. You're not forced to, baby," Liyema: "Ntombi, please don't do this. Not when the moment is so beautiful," Ntombi: "I don't like how...how I look down there,". Is this woman kidding me? Liyema: "I'm your husband,

Ntombi. I love you and all parts of your body even those I haven't seen. Please, baby," I kissed her so she'd let go. I got up from between her legs to just marvel at her body. She was looking at me so unsure of everything which made me wonder if we're rushing. Being married does not mean sex. I kissed her knees that she clenched together. I was about to tell her that we'll try another day when she parted her legs slowly. She covered her face with her hands. Why would she think I'd hate how her womanhood looks? I took a good

look and I wanted her even more. Every part of her is perfect. She has a cut that almost cut one of the lips of her private in half. I did not care about that shit. Was that what she was hiding from me? A small cut? I kissed her inner thighs softly and her sweet scent drove me insane. I enjoyed being between her legs. Soon I got some soft moans from her and felt her hand hold my head. I didn't stop, I could not stop. She called out my name and gently squeezed my head between her thighs while having an orgasm. I loved it. After her moment of

bliss subsided I wanted to kiss her but she refused. I laughed but got my kiss soon. The kissing became intense and passionate once again. I couldn't take it anymore. I was desperate to be inside of her. I put on a condom. We struggled a bit because she was tight and tense. Once I asked her to not tense up we were one. I moved gently and looking at her to check if she was still okay. She felt even better than in the dream. Wet, warm, tight. She moved to my rhythm after a while and I was in another world. I decided to not

overwhelm her with positions. Me taking the lead was perfect for the first time. The moans, soft name whispers, occasional flushed eyes contacts we both had an orgasm together. Her legs were shaking. I held onto her until our orgasms subsided. No dream could compare to the reality of it. I went to get a warm towel to get us both decent after a long while of heavy breathing trying to catch out breaths. I laid next to her and looked at her. Liyema: "No regret?" I asked softly. Ntombi: "No, baby. I love you, Liyema," she cried but while smiling. Liyema: "I

love you too, baby. Shit I love you too," I kissed her. Ntombi:

"Ndlovu," she looked at me.

Liyema: "Ndlovukazi," she smiled.

Ntombi: "I loved what we just

did," she blushed. Liyema: "That

was me just warming up. The

things I'm yet to do to you," she

laughed softly. Ntombi: "Did you

enjoy it? I know you said you did

not in the past out of fear,"

Liyema: "I didn't even think

about anything else. I loved each

second and don't hide parts of

yourself again please, Lala. I love

all of you" Ntombi: "Me too, I love

all of you," she kissed me. "Our

parents will kill us," we laughed. Liyema: "It'll be our secret until I've gone through the right cultural processes. We will have to be married secretly for now. We can tell the boys though," Ntombi: "A secret it is then. Don't forget to take the ring off when you go to work," Liyema: "I'll hate doing that so much. I want the entire world to know but I don't want to give your family reasons to reject my lobola so I'll keep quiet," Ntombi: "We're married," Liyema: "And I love it. All 5 minutes of it," we laughed. Ntombi: "We're crazy, Liyema," Liyema: "You only notice

now?" she laughed. Ntombi: "Uhm can we...have a repeat of what just happened?" I laughed at her request but was happy to grant it. Who was I to deny my wife of what's her? At least I managed to make her like sex. We made love again and again. I forgot that we had dinner at Mma's. We got up to take a shower together. I love my wife. I love touching my wife. I love being in side of her and be one with her. We don't know what will happen but we are ready. I hate that we have to keep it a secret but if we tell, we anger the elders. We left our

rings home. I will give her the wedding she dreams of when the time is right. We acted normal around the parents. I'll speak with Tata soon. I don't want to keep my marriage secret. I couldn't keep my eyes off her, Mrs Elephant. We managed to get through the dinner without raising suspicion. The six of us went home. I hate the thought of a long distance marriage. The boys did not want to sleep. We had to put them in bed with us because we were tired. We got jumped on, bitten, cried on and reality sank in. We might be

newlyweds but there are other people in our lives. By the time they fell asleep we were too tired to put them in their room out of fear of waking them. They never want to sleep in my bed. Out of all the days they chose to do it, they chose the night I wanted to hold my wife all night long. I looked over at Ntombi who was sleeping peacefully. I looked at the guys between us and I just pointed at them. These guys though.

Sleeping peacefully when they ruined my cuddling with my wife. Having kids is really nit easy, no sense of privacy at all. I love

them though. I'm sure they will be happy to hear that I finally put a ring on it. I decided to also sleep. My heart was filled with good things. I'm a husband again but my current wife is sent to me by God. I don't care what anyone else thinks should they find out we're married.

FORTY ONE

NTOMBI

Revealing myself to Liyema, all of me was not easy. I did not mind showing him the stretchmarks on

my belly but for him to want to see all of me was foreign. I love how I look in my love spot but I was not sure that he would.

There was a time when I was 14 years old and there was a rumour that I was sleeping around with the boys in my village. When my stepmother heard of it, she decided to punish me by taking a blade and cutting my labia minora. I don't think I've bled as much in my life. I could not walk for weeks and she refused me medical help out of fear of being asked too many questions. Had she taken me to

the clinic I'd have been stitched up but that did not happen. It's not a big cut but she almost did cut parts of my vagina's outer lip. To have my husband love all of me is good. "it makes you unique, baby," he has said so many times. We've been married for a month and still kept it secret. It has been a month of bliss. The only problem has been the distance and the secrecy. Liyema has spoken to his father and a letter was sent to my grandfather to let him know that he should expect the Elephant family soon. I have not told Liyema about his

father threatening me back when I had just given birth. Mr Elephant still intimidates me with just his presence but he had not been unkind towards me at all. I don't think telling Liyema about something that happened when we were all confused and emotional is worth it. My family has not gotten back to the Elephants yet because there is conflict about who should lead the negotiations. I told them I don't care as long as it's done. Makhulu seems to have convinced Tamkhulu to let my father lead them since I carry his surname.

Now the Elephants have been waiting to hear if they should go to Queentown or Peddie for the lobola negotiations. My poor husband has been stressing about it because he says he hates that he can't flaunt me. On the bright side, it had allowed us to enjoy our secret marriage. I decided to spend the September break at Liyema's. Makhulu did not understand why I did not go home. I couldn't exactly tell them because I wanted to be with my sons and husband. She told me to stop visiting until the lobola is done and I'd die. I had to beg her

using how I miss the boys as emotional blackmail. I'm not proud but I can't stand to be away from them. My bursary has stipulated that I'll only be able to transfer next year. I can't lose it so I have to respect their conditions. I've been in Cape Town for two days. Time flies by so fast. Waking up next to my husband has been great. I've even memorised the time he takes his treatment just in case the reminder does not go off. I once heard a girl in class say she'd never be with a man with HIV. At first I felt my blood boil but

then I realized its non of my business. Some people just don't know much about it. Even if the entire world knew I'm married to an HIV positive man I would feel no shame. Most of the people at varsity sleep around without protection because their partners assures them they are negative but they might be lying. My husband has been open about his status to me, he always makes sure he has condoms and I've also been buying my own just in case he forgets to purchase. He is a businessman and a full time father so these things could slip

his mind. I've never not once feared he'd infect me. He is not HIV, he just has HIV. I hated wearing my ring as a necklace at school. I wanted guys to know I'm a Missus now. Liyema and I sat in our bed late at night after a long, fun day at the beach. I went with their nannies because it might be a holiday for me but it's work for him. Liyema: "I think I should take leave to spend more time with you guys," I looked up at him. I sat between his legs. Ntombi: "Only if you can, baby. I don't mind waiting until you come back from work," I kissed him.

Liyema: "So your family still has not made up their minds about where my family should take the cows?" Ntombi: "It seems it'll be Queenstown. I don't want to go to my father's house while that woman is there. Makhulu says she uses dark magic," he laughed softly. Liyema: "Do you believe in that?" I shrugged. Ntombi: "I know that there are people who go to shady sangomas for muti, baby. I don't know if the muti works though. When I was pregnant Makhulu would not even allow me to step foot in Queenstown to visit my father.

She believed in these stuff. It's weird because she also prays,"

Liyema: "After all you've told me this woman has done to you, I'm glad Makhulu didn't allow you to go. Maybe she would have "accidentally" pushed you. I'm glad I married the mother of my children," I smiled at him. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my neck. Ntombi: "I'd have been the dramatic baby mama had you not," he laughed. Liyema: "So since you and I will be married publicly soon, we have to go to church together. I don't like leaving you here on Sundays. Good

thing is that we go to the same church. Will you be wearing the red jacket now?," we both laughed. Ntombi: "What? No, baby," Liyema: "Now that you're married you won't be called "sisi, you'll be "mama" you must dress accordingly," he laughed. "I'm just kidding, babe. We will deal with such when the time comes. I just want this lobola thing over with already so I can introduce you to my entire family," Ntombi: "Do you think they will like me?", I looked at him. Liyema: "I won't lie, Lala there still are a few Zingisa fans but most will love you. When my

paternal grandmother loves you, you don't have to care about the rest because she is as good as being the clan leader though she's a makoti to the Elephants. I know she'll love you," Ntombi: "You can't be sure. Your family sounds big," Liyema: "When I went to show her the boys she told me to bring the woman who gave the Elephants such treasures so she'd bow to her," I laughed. "Okay maybe not the bowing part," we both laughed. Ntombi: "I'm scared though. What if they give me a strange makoti name just because they don't like me?,"

Liyema: "That part is sorted but I can't tell you the name. You've heard me call you Lala a few times right?" I nodded. "Well when Lulonke and I used to go to family weddings she always said she already knows what she'll name my wife. I can't tell you but Lala is the clue," he grinned.

Ntombi: "You do know the name will not come from you right?"

Liyema: "I've bribed a few people to make things work in my favor. I want you to have the name my twin would have given you. She would have loved you so much," I smiled. Ntombi: "I'm sure I'd

have loved her. Wait..." he looked at me while I went memory lane "I remember where I saw her...she was there when I gave birth. Your sister was there when I gave birth," I looked at him and he looked at me as though I was crazy. Liyema: "I'm not following," Ntombi: "I think it was when I was put to sleep for the operation. There was a girl. I finally remember her her face and it's the girl in the pictures you've shown me...she was there when her nephews were born," I whispered. He smiled. Liyema: "I believe you, sthandwa sam. I

wish we were like we are now when they were born," Ntombi: "Things turned out as they should have. Ndlovu, I ask that we have this big wedding you've been talking about when I'm done studying," I thought he would protest. Liyema: "I don't have a problem with that, Mrs Elephant," he smiled. Ntombi: "Why are you guys Elephant and not Ndlovu?" Liyema: "You mean why are we, you included Elephant?" we both laughed. "I think it got westernized during the Apartheid era, baby. I love that you call me Ndlovu though.

It sounds strong and so respectful and when you say I get turned on," I blushed. Ntombi: "Ndlovu," I said in a sexy voice. Liyema: "Woman, don't make me do things to you," he slid his hand between my thighs. Ntombi: "Ndlovu, Ndlovu," I said in a flirtatious voice and turned to face him "Ndlovu," I said slowly and kissed him. Things got heated and kinky after that. I sometimes don't know where the screams come from but I can't help it. He drives me insane but in a good way. I love surrendering myself to him and I think the

distance makes us hungry for each other even more. He's taught me a few new things too. I don't want him to stop making love to me. I'm still worried about his family not liking me. I'm not the first wife he brings home. I don't want to be in Zingisa's shadow. Liyema keeps telling me that to even think that is an insult to myself but that's because he sees me and Zingisa differently. His family might still like her. The last thing I want is to be married to monster inlaws. His immediate family has accepted me. His mother and

brother are actually quite fond of me but there will be moments where we will have to go to his homestead where most of his family will be. They are from Mtata, well at least his father is. They are a huge family judging from how he talks about them. They are also a successful family. My family on the other hand consists of Makhulu, Tamkhulu and Tata. They have extended family but I don't know them. We aren't poor but compared to the Elephants we are poor. I don't want to compare our families but some well off families look down on

other people. I imagine it was easy for Zingisa, her father was also rich. Liyema assures me that I'm worrying about nothing but he won't be there with me all the time once I'm makoti. I won't exactly be able to cry to him whenever things happen that hurt me. I looked at him while he was sleeping. I love how thick and messy his brows are. I brushed them with my fingers while smiling. I think this man has fed me love potion indeed because I can't get enough of him. I kissed him before putting my arm and leg over him. His hand wrapped

naturally around my shoulder. I love being a married woman.

There will be tough times ahead but as long as he is next to me I won't be afraid. My phone vibrated and I looked at the screen. I would only have answered had it been my grandparents or father but it was a private call so I switched it off and returned to my husband's arms. LIYEMA

Ntombi's family delaying is causing me more stress than I let on. My other fear is that her grandfather will want livestock while her father will want cash

which might delay even more. I don't care who gets the lobola or in which form it they prefer it. I just want to stop sneaking around with my wife like she's some side chick. I'm also not planning on being a husband who will allow his family to mistreat his wife. I didn't want to tell her that most loved Zingisa and put pressure on her. I don't want her to think she's competing with the memories of my ex wife. I'm not going to insult my wife by comparing her to Zingisa. It's not even a damn competition. I can see that she is worried about

having to go to her father's house to should the negotiations be there. She will have to be there to welcome us once the lobola is done. Perhaps I could get her a place to stay and only have her go to the house on the day. Ntombi has been waking up early when I get ready for work. While I was busy getting ready she was busy preparing breakfast and even making me lunch. I've never carried lunch to work until my wife came into my life. Not that I get to enjoy it because Vusi always asks for some. I haven't even told him I'm

married. When I'm at work my mind is at home. I'm one of the bosses and could come and go as I want but I'm also a team player and hard worker. My father called saying he wants to see Ntombi and I. It was more of an order than asking. I told him I'd ask Ntombi. I'm not going to bully my wife into meeting my family whenever it suits them. She said its fine so I confirmed that we'll come after work. At least tomorrow I'll be off to spend the day with them. I found Ntombi and the boys ready to go when I got home. Ma Eunice has started

her daycare so she has become a stranger but we talk on the phone often. We told their nannies they can go home because we will go with them to the parents.

Liyema: "You need to learn how to drive, baby," I looked at her briefly and focused on the road again. Ntombi: "I've been thinking about that. I think it's a great idea," she smiled. Liyema: "I'll give you your first lesson tomorrow.

You need to get your learners when you're back in PE," Ntombi: "What if I crash your car?"

Liyema: "Then you'll have to explain to those four why they

will be walking to their destinations, "we both laughed.

Bubele: "Ta," he said softly.

Liyema: "Yes, boy," I looked at him through the mirror. He was pointing at one of those yellow forklift trucks. Soon they all made vibrating sounds with their mouths to imitate the sound of the truck. We just laughed.

Ntombi: "I think we have truck fans," she looked behind and smiled. "I've been getting missed calls from a private number," she looked at me.

Liyema: "Yeah? Have you answered?"

Ntombi: "The line gets cut off when I do,"

Liyema: "That's strange. When was the last time you got it?"

Ntombi: "Right before you picked us up. I'm sure it's nothing. Did your father say why he wanted to see us?" I shook my head. "Do you think there is a problem with the lobola process?" Liyema:

"Let's not assume, love. We're almost there and will soon find out. Everything will be okay though," I took her hand and kissed it. The noise that came from the back. The boys were having a conversation it seems, one only they understand. I'm sure they were gossiping about

us. We arrived at Mr Elephant seniors big house. I don't think I want such a big house. Since we only have boys, they can continue sharing a room until they move out. We got the boys out of their car seats. They don't even want to be held now that they can walk on their own. They still fall forward and land on their hands sometimes but they are determined to perfect walking. Mma came out and they rushed as fast as their little legs could to her. The fear of them falling is giving Ntombi mini heart attacks. Mma looked like she wanted to tell

us something before we went in but soon my father, Ntombi's grandparents and her father appeared. I looked at her and could see the slight fear in her eyes. I held out my hand to her, she put hers in it. She is my wife so I have a right to hold her hand and something told me they knew we are married. We all walked inside and we greeted the elders. The tension that hung in the air was clear. We sat down. My father called his domestic worker. She appeared in a rush. Ta: "Vuyi, take the boys to the playroom," he ordered. No please?

She tried to take the boys but they clung to me and Ntombi.

Liyema: "It's okay, sis Vuyi," I smiled to assure her she won't be in any trouble should she not follow orders. These are my kids after all. I picked up two and Ntombi did the same. There I sat next to my wife. Our boys on our laps resting their heads on our chests waiting for the jury to tell us why they we are here. At least it feels like we are in court.

Ta: "So Liyema there I went to Home Affairs going about my business. I find Jola, remember him? He works there. Imagine my

shock when he congratulated me on your marriage. Apparently he saw that you'd gotten married on their systems. So I thought I'd call the Mlandu and Poti family since their daughter's name appeared on the system with yours. We all want to know what is happening," he said in a slightly sarcastic way. I looked at Ntombi. Mrs Mlandu: "Ntombi, tell me this is not true," she said softly looking at Ntombi. Ntombi did not reply. "Oh, Ntombi but why do you always make bad choices. It seems both you and your mother had no respect for

our culture,". A tear escaped Ntombi eye. Liyema: "Yes, we are married, Ta. Have been for a few weeks now," all of them were shocked. "We are sorry for not telling you. Things just happened fast. We planned to keep it quiet because we wanted to follow cultural processes before telling the families," I said while looking at Ntombi. Mr Mlandu: "In our culture we don't start with westernized ways and follow with cultural ways. To us the two of you are as good as just cohabiting because the families don't know each other," Mr Poti: "Oh, Ntombi,

I thought you would learn from my and your mother's mistakes," Ntombi: "I'm sorry, Tata," more tears came. I wanted to get up and get my family home but I couldn't. Ta: "Liyema, what type of people do you want this family to think we are. First you get their daughter pregnant and no damages were paid and now you married her like a dirty little secret without lobola? Did I raise you to disrespect culture like this?" Liyema: "No, Ta but I've never seen my wife as a dirty little secret and I won't act like I regret marrying her. I won't

even act like I regret the day I chose to marry her. With all of the stalling that had been happening with the lobola, it's clear we would have gotten married who knows when," Ta: "Hey, shut up man," he pointed at me. The boys got startled a bit. Liyema: "You're scaring my children and please don't speak to me like I'm a child, not in front of my wife and children. You wouldn't like it to be done to you," I looked at him and he did the same. Mma: "No, I don't want this, not in my house. We are all adults please," she looked at my father and I.

Mr Mlandu: "A fight is the last thing we want, Ma Elephant but these children must know that what they did is wrong. First they have children in a manner none of us understand and now this. You have shown my child great disrespect, boy," Ntombi: "Liyema did not force me to do anything. I don't understand why you can't see the beauty in what is in front of you. I'm not sleeping around with varsity boys and having wild parties, Tamkhulu. I'm in front of you holding my sons with my husband and other boys next to me. We are sorry for

everything but like my husband we don't regret anything. If given a chance I'd marry him again. It puzzles me even more when you say our marriage is as good as cohabiting because our marriage was officiated by a respected Christian man. Our marriage has been blessed and you might not recognize it but I believe that God does," she said while avoiding eye contact with them. They all kept quiet. Liyema: "Mma when was the last time you've seen me this happy?," I looked at her and she tried not to smile. Mrs Mlandu: "We can see

that you are happy, my children but you were wrong," Liyema: "And we are truly sorry, Makhulu Mlandu and ask that you give us a chance to rectify it by welcoming my lobola," Ta: "You two have not even known each other long. You didn't even go for pre-merital counselling," Liyema: "Are you telling me that after all these years you have not learned new things about Mma while married to her?" Mr Poti: "He has a point. You can't fully know someone. Aside from the secrecy, I'm glad you followed your heart. Who am I too judge after I broke so many

traditions for love. You have my blessings, my girl," he smiled and looked at his daughter. Ntombi: "Thank you, Tata," she smiled at me. The rest just kept quiet. Mma: "I say the damage is already done. The children are married and I'm not about to ask them to divorce because they didn't do things according to tradition. I've got a daughter again, one I've grown to love and respect. My child is happy. Oh nothing warms my heart more than seeing my baby bear happy. Also my bubbles will have stability. Ntombi it's not that we

are blind to the beauty before us, my baby. I guess we feel it's rushed but who are we to say. Right now we are the only ones who know they went about things...uhm..." Ta: "The wrong way," he finished her sentence. Mma: "No differently...but it's not too late to have the lobola negotiations. Ntombi's family is here. Let's take advantage of it," Mr Mlandu: "We are not going to have the negotiations in your house. It is you who have to come to us," Ta: "I agree with Mr Mlandu let's not cut more processes. This is not how I

wanted things to end up. I don't want Ntombi's family seeing what I did as red flags. I meant no disrespect to her nor her family. We thought they were done but they gave us more reasons as to why it should not have happened. I really appreciate Mma speaking up for us. It was concluded that the negotiations will be in Queenstown. I knew it was not news Ntombi wanted to hear. We will make the best of a bad situation, we always do. No one will harm her there. The days her stepmother hit and even cut her are over. I despise the woman

but have never even met her. My father flew elderly people all the way for nothing. He could have had my back and asked them to accept my offer to negotiate lobola with them instead of bringing them here and talking to me like I'm a child. I'm sure he wanted to humiliate me. Mr Mlandu is a true peacemaker. Mrs Mlandu was just happy that I'll honour her girl and happy to see the boys. I can't believe I kept them away from them for so long. I'll always regret that, always. Mma called me to the kitchen to hugged me. She was more excited

than I am. Mma: "Look at you," she brushed my arms while smiling. "Have you told her?" she asked. Liyema: "About my status?" she nodded. "Zingisa did the honours a long time ago," Mma: "That witch. Sue her, Liyema," Liyema: "Not worth my time nor effort. After she told Ntombi, we grew closer. So much I have to actually thank her. My wife loves me as I am," Mma: "You wife," she smiled. Liyema: "My wife," I smiled from ear to ear. Mma: "Finally I have a daughter again now she can't come up with excuses when I take her out for

girl time. You'll have to tell me what she likes to do. We must get this lobola over with," she left me standing like she was not just talking to me. I'm sure to suggest the negotiations be this weekend. I wouldn't put it past her. Ntombi walked in and hugged me from behind. I smiled and turned to look at her. I put her on the kitchen counter and she was uncomfortable. Ntombi: "We are not home, Liyema. I don't want to get us into more trouble," he looked at the door. Liyema: "Had we been home, you would have nothing on," she blushed. "I

can't believe my father didn't come to me first. Just when I thought the man was starting to be a normal father," Ntombi: "Let it go please. It has happened, baby and I don't think he did it out of spite," Liyema: "I've been meaning to ask why you look tense around him," she looked down "Ntombi", I said. Ntombi: "It's not important. When I was at the hospital he offered me money to not fight you for the boys and when I declined, he kinda made threats," she said. I was about to go give my father a piece of my mind but she blocked the door.

"Liyema it was a time when we were all mad. You made some threats too and so did I. He had not been mean to me. It was just emotions," she looked at me.

Liyema: "Okay, yeah...you're right but it's wish you shared it with me," she smiled. Ntombi: "I'm sorry, baby bear," she said imitating my mother. We both laughed. I love her so much. We make a great team in front of our elders too. I thought she would say she regretted everything. I kissed her and her phone vibrated again. She showed it to me, it's a private call. I took it and

answered. Liyema: "Listen, I don't know who you are but you're clearly bored. If you don't stop calling my wife, you'll regret it," I said and the call got cut. Ntombi: "I'm sure they got the message now that they know I've got a strong, African king to protect me," she kissed me. Liyema: "Well let us show the world that the queen has a king," I took her necklace with her wedding ring off, took the ring off it and placed it in her finger. I took my ring out of my pocket and put it on. "Do you think Jake wants his rings back?," we both laughed.

Ntombi: "He said its gifts. I like how they fit, like they were meant for us," Liyema: "They were, Mrs Elephant", I kissed her passionately. Mma: "Whooo go home to your house, my children," we broke the kiss and blushed. We stayed for a while. We also took Ntombi's family to our house. They refused to stay at our house and my parents house because the families don't know each other yet. Culture though. These people have met and spent time together yet the families "don't know each other". Ntombi and I will do as they say until she

is officially a part of the Elephant clan. Good thing I took a day off for tomorrow. After that meeting I need rest, not that I'll get it with children around. It's just wishful thinking. I love being a family man though. I took my in-laws to Gugulethu where Mrs Mlandu's cousin lives and where they will stay for the night. I'm just glad they didn't insist on Ntombi going with them until after I've paid lobola. We have such little time together already but the year is almost over so I can wait. It feels good to feel my ring around my finger even when

around people. I'm a proud husband and I wear the ring with pride too. I'll have to pay Jake for the rings because we love them too much to return them. We don't even know if they are great quality or not. I also don't appreciate dad's friend giving out information that was not his to share. Some people don't fear losing their jobs clearly.

FORTY TWO

BONGA

There I was pushing my hustle as I've always done when I got a call from a person I never thought I'd speak to again. I don't even know how she got my number. It was a call from my aunt, Nomvula. We decided it was best we not talk after I left Queenstown with Ntombi. She is a very, very distant family member. I don't know how we are related exactly but it has something to do with my mother's side of the family. She had some interesting news for me, well according to her it was interesting news. When she first

mentioned Ntombi's name I hung up. I didn't care whether Ntombi had died on the streets or selling her body because after she left me, there was no way she would have ended up any better.

Nomvula kept calling me and I kept ignoring until I picked up to tell her where to get off. What she had to say shocked me and angered me. She said Ntombi had four children from that stupid surrogacy business. That was not all, she also told me the bitch managed to worm her way to the father's bed. How stupid can this man be? I've been calling her but

kept quiet. I wanted her to wonder who it was until her man answered the phone to tell me to back off. The bastard is loaded so I did not want to push things and stopped calling. Nomvula then told me Ntombi got married. I could not believe the stupidity of this guy. Well he proved to be stupid by the way he chose to have kids but to marry Ntombi is another level of stupid. I get that Ntombi has that wife material thing about her but that is all there is to it, it's an appearance. She's as stiff as a plank in bed. That man will cheat

in a few months. Nomvula told me to come to Queenstown when it'll be Ntombi's lobola. She deserves a few chicken, not cows. I decided to go hear what my dear aunt has to say. She invited me over at her house when she was alone. I sat and watched her bring me one of her hidden gin bottles. Some things never change. She poured me a glass and I preferred it clean. I took one sip and finished it demanding a refill. Bonga: "So why do you think I should care about some fool marrying your stepdaughter?", I looked at her Nomvula: "If you didn't care, you

would not have come all the way from the Western Cape to listen to me," she said and she might have a point. Bonga: "You still have not answered me," she sat closer to me. Nomvula: "Do you remember how you got Ntombi in the first place?" Bonga: "Are you sure you're alone here?", I looked at the door. Nomvula: "Relax, my kids are somewhere visiting their friends and my husband has gone to find a sheep to feed his beloved daughter's husband and his family once the negotiations are done," she rolled her eyes. Bonga: "It sounds like it will be lots of fun,"

Nomvula: "And you and I don't want that. You did pay money for Ntombi, so technically she is already married because you paid lobola for her," we laughed. Bonga: "After you promised her to me, so technically you sold her to me. She was naive and believed all the lies of love I told her and you treating her like trash made her find my shoulder to cry on,"

Nomvula: "Which was the plan to begin with. I wanted her out of my house and you needed someone to look after you. She didn't even know she was sold because her brain is as small as a peanut. I

don't understand how an educated, wealthy man can marry such," Bonga: "You're right, she does belong to me. I can't be eating like a hungry dog while she eats like a queen. I at least have to get my money back with interest. I mean i fed the bitch for years," Nomvula: "Good boy, now we are on the same page. I was thinking you can keep Ntombi safe for her husband and have him pay you for looking after his wife," she smiled. Bonga: "Kidnap her and demand ransom?"

Nomvula: "I said keep her safe for her husband and get a reward

for it. One I'll want half of," she took a sip of the clean gin. Bonga: "How will you get her?" Nomvula: "Well I've arranged for someone to delay my husband's sheep hunting. Ntombi told her father she will only arrive today and sleep over if I'm not here so I'll take my daughter to my sister's place with me. My son asked to go to his friends to sleep over since its the December holidays," Bonga: "How sure are you that her husband won't come with her?" Nomvula: "Maybe to drop her off but that's why you won't be far. He won't sleep over should he

bring her," Bonga: "What if your husband comes home earlier than you expect?" Nomvula: "You don't know how desperate he is to have tomorrow go smoothly. After months of talks between the two families they finally reached an agreement. Tomorrow they will finalise and celebrate. He wants his rich in laws to be impressed. And I did say I've found a way to make it impossible for him to come back early. By the time he comes, you'd have gotten Ntombi. We have worked together before and can do it again," Bonga: "I don't want Ntombi," Nomvula:

"After you get the money, I don't care if you discard of her or keep her for your amusement," Bonga: "If the devil had a wife, you'd be her," Nomvula: "If I had a son with the devil, you'd be him," we both laughed. Bonga: "Okay I've trusted you before so I trust you when you say you've got it all figured out. It seems telling that fool about how Ntombi played him was not enough to make her suffer so I didn't punish her. This can be my chance to do so and get the money I gave you for her back. It's a win-win. Nomvula: "Good thing her grandmother

despises everything about me, including my house. I don't know how I would have gotten rid of her. Poor Ntombi is on her way here thinking that she's going to celebrate tomorrow and be taken to her in laws the next day. I don't know why but that child had never been able to win my heart. I guess it's because her mother stole my man and married him but at least I got him back," Bonga: "I don't care about your beef with Ntombi's mother. Just tell me the plan in detail. I need to know when I should be here and which room she will sleep in. Also

give me the keys to the house. I think she will definitely lock all doors since she'll be alone," She poured more gin for us while we went over our plan. I got a spare key too, hers. I honestly don't want Ntombi in my life anymore but Nomvula is right I need to get a piece of the pie before I leave her alone for good. Had I been her husband I'd have told the kidnappers to keep her but if he married her, he will pay the ransom I guess. It seems I'll be rich after all the years of struggle. I made a good investment by taking Ntombi

after all. My investment has matured and it's time I enjoy the rewards. NTOMBI Liyema wanted to book me in somewhere and have me go to my father's house tomorrow when we'll be welcoming his family. When I told my father that I could see he was sad. He suggested that he will have Nomvula out for the night if her presence is too much for me. I was actually surprised to hear that she agreed. It makes me sad that I'll be alone with my father the day before my lobola is finalized but at least I'll be able to enjoy life with my

husband. My transfer to UCT got approved and my bursary will pay for my second year too because my results were good. I'll miss the friends I made but I can't stand to be away from my family each week for five days for another year. The families decided that the December break will be good to do everything. The lobola and then my welcoming to the Elephant clan, the entire clan. Makhulu did not want to sleep in Nomvula's house but promised to be here tomorrow before the sun came up to help me and she'll bring two taxis filled with

extended family too. The boys have stayed in Cape Town with their grandmother. When I arrived at my father's house it was already a bit dark. It'll be the first time I sleep here since I ran from home. I hate that I'm alone but it is what it is. I walked around the new house for the first time. I cried while walking around because this is my mother's house. I should have been having tea with her while telling her how excited I am about tomorrow and how nervous I'm feeling about going to meet Liyema's extended family. She

would have given me marriages advise but instead I found myself alone. It felt like the day before my wedding but I'm not surrounded by family. I called Liyema crying and he said its only for tonight. He was busy with his uncles and father in preparation for tomorrow so couldn't talk. I realized that the house was filled with dust. Nomvula has never been the most tidy person. I went to open the kitchen cupboards to look for cleaning material. I found everything I was looking for and started to mop the floors. I dusted all the

gray looking places until everything shined and smelled fresh. The last thing I want is for my in laws to be welcomed to a dirt filled house. I should have invited Xoli to be with me but she missed her home too. I did not go into the bedrooms because it would have been an invasion of privacy. I laid on the couch feeling exhausted when I heard a sound come from one of the rooms. I took the broom and went to investigate. I locked all the door after I walked in and Tata said he got delayed due to car problems so I knew I was alone

or at least am supposed to be. I walked barefoot on the cool tiles slowly making my way down the passage. I heard someone cough and I was certain I was not alone. I dialed Liyema's number but it just rang. The cops will take forever to get here so I thought it's best I find the intruder and beat him with the broom. The sound came from Lwazi's room. I entered the room filled with posters of famous rappers on the wall but it was empty. I checked under the bed and almost got a heart attack when I found someone under it. I

poked them hard with the stick. I wanted the person to come out so I'd lay my broom stick on him hard. He rolled out and I started to whip him. Lwazi: "Sis Ntombi it's me. Stop it," he shouted. I stopped when I realized it was him indeed. I helped him up.

Ntombi: "What are you doing under the bed, Lwazi? Tata said you're at your friend's house but here you are hiding under the bed. I nearly killed you, man," I shouted at him. Lwazi: "I'm sorry but I was there to protect you. I called the police but they said I'm wasting their time. Apparently

I'm one of the kids who have been calling them to give fake tip offs," Ntombi: "Are you?" Lwazi: "No, sis Ntombi...well okay I did it once, just once. The guy said he remembers my voice and dropped the phone,". I've never been so confused in my life. What is this boy on about? Ntombi: "Woah back down a bit. Protect me and calling cops? I don't understand, Lwazi. Are you a part of a gang, Lwazi? Is that why you're hiding because someone is looking for you?" I shouted while looking at him. Lwazi: "For you actually," I just looked at him waiting for him to

bring me out of the dark and into the light. Why would anyone look for me? "Look there I was at my friend's house in deep thought. I realized that my sister that I love is getting married tomorrow, well lobola but anyway it's important. So I sat there and could not believe that Mama made me go away when my sister needed me. I mean who is going to open the gate for your in laws tomorrow? That is my job..., " I smiled and hugged him. My baby brother is amazing. "Sisi, no listen there is more. So I come home right and found Mama talking to

some guy. Hey the entire house reeked of alcohol. They clearly did not hear me come in. I heard this man ask Mama if they were alone and I knew they were up to no good. I first thought that Mama was cheating so I took out my phone to record it. The things I heard, sisi," he started to cry. What could his mother have done that hurt the child so much. I hugged him waiting until he calmed down enough to tell me what he heard. Is his mother cheating? He couldn't repeat their words so he just took out his phone and played a recording.

My shock when I heard Nomvula and Bonga plot against me. She planned the entire thing with Bonga from the beginning and he even paid her? So I basically got trafficked without even knowing it. I was crying with my brother like we had just heard about a death of a loved one. How evil can people be? So Nomvula was Tata's man before he was with Mama? That explains her hate but to sell me and now planning my kidnapping? I told Lwazi to send the recording to my phone. I once again called Liyema but it went straight to voicemail. I

sent him the audio via Whatsapp but it did not go through. I was about to call Tata and then the cops but there was fiddling in the front door. It was late so Bonga waited until night. Is he going to do the job himself? There was no time to make more calls. Lwazi and I had to think on our feet. We figured that he expected me to be in bed. So I put pillows in the bed I was to sleep in while he struggled to get it. In the recording Nomvula told him exactly where he will find me and perhaps even showed him around. We planned to ambush him when

he got to the room. The lights were all on and to switch them off would make him suspicious. I'm tired of this man and if I kill him in self defense then so be it. I wished my brother was not a part of this but without him I would not even know so I wouldn't have had as fighting chance. I gave Lwazi the broom and I took the knife I used to peel the apple I was eating. If there is someone who will kill Bonga it was not going to be my brother. We hid in his room and could hear the soft, careful footsteps leading to the last room down the passage.

When he was inside we went for him. So stabbed him on his shoulder. He fought back and the knife landed on the other side of the room. The smell of tobacco and booze lingered bringing back so many bad memories. Lwazi at first stood looking scared but soon started hitting him with the broom while I was on his back choking him. He seems a bit tipsy which worked in our favour. I don't know where I got the strength from. I wanted to kill him, I've never felt an urge to kill someone like I did with Bonga. Lwazi hit his knees while I still

held my arm around his neck. He was struggling and went on his knees. I felt something sting my thigh but I didn't care. My grip around his neck got weak and I didn't understand why. Bonga got up, shook me off him with ease this time around and had me meet the hard wall with my back before landing on the floor. I felt weak. I tried to stand but my vision was blurry. Even though I couldn't see well, I managed to see Bonga take out a pocket knife and swung it at, Lwazi. I was not about to have my brother die, not after what he did for me.

Lwazi did not stop hitting Bonga even after I told him to run and look for help. I got up and heard Lwazi scream. I blinked a few times to look at him and his yellow shirt was red with blood. I told him again to go look for help. He ran out and I could only hope he wouldn't bleed to death on the way. Bonga approached me, I saw my knife not so far from me. I reached for it quickly and stabbed his foot. A weak stab but he groaned in pain so I'm sure I inflicted some pain. Bonga: "You now have the strength to fight back, you bitch," he shouted

and the got dragged somewhere. He held my right ankle while dragging me. I was being dragged down the passage. I could not hold on to anything, I couldn't scream nor fight back. I was at his mercy and I know by experience what happens when Bonga got angry. Even if I die I at least stabbed him two times. He will remember me by the scars I left on his body. He painfully let go of my leg. He stopped dragging me. I heard Lwazi's voice and the yellow I saw through my weak vision told me he was back. I heard what sounded like fighting.

Lwazi helped me up but I was too dizzy and had to lean on the wall. "Sisi", I heard my brother shout. The fear in his voice was too great to ignore. What did Bonga do to me? I fell to the floor with no support and went down hitting my head, it was a total blank after that. LIYEMA
My phone battery died and when I charged and switched it on, I got endless messages. Ntombi has been calling me and left me text messages. He thought she was feeling lonely since she is alone. I called back but she did not answer. I checked her whatsapp

messages and found an audio. I thought it's her going to give me an earful for not answering my phone. What I listened to was disturbing. It was her stepmother and ex talking. I called her father but he told me he would be home very late. I drove to her house as soon as possible. I was just happy I was in Queenstown with her and not in Cape Town. I got delayed by cows on the road. It was night, who leaves their cows out at night? I also got lost in her neighbourhood but then someone was signaling for me to stop. I did not want to

but had no choice when the person threw themselves in front of my car. I got out and saw a boy who was bleeding. He told me his sister needs help. He was bleeding a lot but when I realized it was Ntombi's brother from the photos I rushed inside. Seeing my wife being dragged like some piece of dead meat made me lose all sense of reality. I went to the man responsible and I beat him until he lost consciousness but I kept on laying heavy fists on his face until I felt someone hold me back. When I return to reality I saw Ntombi laying on the floor. I

went to her, she was breathing. I looked at her brother who had also become too weak from losing blood. I don't know who called an ambulance and the police but I heard sirens outside. They wanted to take Bonga on the ambulance and I told them he will not ride with my wife and brother. They took him to the hospital in the police van. Ntombi and Lwazi got help. I spoke to the police to tell them what I knew. They put police presence at Bonga's room. Apparently they also found drugs in his car. I'm sure he will be charged with

attempted murder, attempted kidnapping, possession of illegal drugs and who knows what more. An arrest was put out for Nomvula too. I can't believe a mother would do that. Sell her child? I gave the police the audio but they wanted the phone it was taken with. We had to wait a while but later Lwazi was strong enough to make a statement and gave his phone freely. This told me that Lwazi is a young man with truth and integrity. He could have saved his mother but he chose truth. I was finally allowed to see my wife. I found her

awake and sitting up. Bonga had injected her with a mild sedative. She wanted to stand but laid down again. The drug is not out of her system yet. Liyema: "I'm sorry I was not there to protect you, baby. I should have made sure my phone is charged dammit. You must have been so scared," I wiped the tear that fell quickly. She pouted her lips for a kiss and I kissed her. Ntombi: "You came. The police told me that you came just in time, baby. Apparently had Bonga gotten me into his car, you would not have found me easily....You came," she smiled. I

don't cry much that's her thing but I broke down in tears while kissing her. She wiped my snotty nose and tears. "You and Lwazi are my heros. Did he tell you what he did? Can I go see him?"

Liyema: "He is the hero. He told the police where they might find his mom too," Lwazi: "Knock, knock. Is it safe to come in?" he stood by the door. We let him in. He had a bandage around his chest. He hugged his sister. "I'm sorry I was too scared to do more than just hit him with a broom. I couldn't bring myself to take the knife," Ntombi: "Are you kidding

me, we gave him hell. Had he not drugged me, he wouldn't have lived to tell the tale," they laughed. Lwazi: "Why don't we become detectives?" Liyema: "What? Hell no!" they laughed. Lwazi: "I can't believe Mama did that. Tata is better off," Liyema: "What was your plan, Lwazi. Why didn't you call for help?" Lwazi: "I did bhut Liyema. The police cut my call. My plan was to wait for the thug and attack him when I see him try to hurt my sister. I'm great at stick fighting. He brought a knife to a stick fight," Ntombi: "Stop making fake calls

of fake tip offs to the police, Lwazi. Look they didn't believe you because you played them for fools once. Other than that I'm glad you were there. I felt more safer and if you were not there I'd be gone now. How are you feeling?" Lwazi: "I'm worried about having to push that heavy gate for the in laws to come in. Bhut Liyema you all will have to climb over it," he joked and we laughed. Liyema: "How are you?" Ntombi: "I'm okay. I just have a headache. Can we postpone the negotiations until tomorrow. I know your family prepared for

today?" Liyema: "Of course. Your family is outside and my dad too. You scared me, Ntombi," Ntombi: "I'm sorry, baby. Your wife has some fighting skills. You should have seen me in action," I laughed. Liyema: "I'm sure you were bad ass," I don't like hearing that she had to fight for her life. I failed her. I promised her safety. I didn't tell her that I nearly killed him. Had that man from next door not stopped me I'd have killed a man. The family joined us to see how she is. We were all sad that we had to postpone but their recovery is

more important. The detective came to tell us that Nomvula was arrested. She might be out soon but I'm sure Bonga will be in for a long while. He dug his own grave by having drugs worth R250 000 in his trunk. I'm sure he was making a delivery close by or was collecting stock. Mma called to talk to her daughter and was crying over the phone. I don't ever want to see my wife abused like that again. I can't believe she stayed with that thing for so many year. How many times has he not dragged her like that in the past? Had I come later he

might have killed her. I would not have survived losing her. I'll always make sure my phone is charged from now on. I thank God I was near by. I'm not sure if Ntombi and Lwazi will have traumatic flashback after this but we will deal with it should it happened. I thanked my new little brother again. Makhule Mlandu kept telling Mr Poti that the negotiations should have happened in Peddie and I agree with her. There Ntombi would not have been alone. Her uncle kept asking me how much money I

have while at the hospital. What a freaking day!

FORTY THREE

NTOMBI

I've heard people say that life will put you to the test until you are strong enough. I don't think I can get more stronger than I already am. Life should just give me a break now. I think I deserve it. This incident with Bonga has made the bond between my brother and I stronger. We got along before but

I think having a near death experience together strengthened our relationship. He indeed did the job of standing by the gate and being messenger between our family and Liyema's while they stood outside asking to come in. He says he made them pay too. The negotiations went well and my husband and I could finally be a married couple publicly. Nomvula got bail but her family is too broke to pay it and Tata refuses to bail her out. Nolwazi packed everything of hers and went to her aunt's place. She in so many words told me that she hated me.

I know she is a good child and I'm hoping that someday she will see how wrong her mother was and we can build a relationship. I think she will need me as big sister to have all those uncomfortable conversations about boys, sex and such with but I will let her reach out in her own time. For now I will not try to convince her to love me because I do not feel bad for her mother being in jail. Bonga is still in hospital with two broken ribs. Liyema nearly killed him and I was not about to judge nor fault my husband for protecting my

brother and I. I think most of us if not all are capable of killing when our lives or the ones we love are in danger. I wrote Nomvula a lengthy letter not to insult her but to tell her that I have forgiven her completely. I no longer want to carry the fear and hate I had for her. I'm about to start a new life. I have a family of my own now and in some weird twisted way she made it possible by selling me to Bonga. I don't care what she does with my forgiveness that is between her and God but I know I'm free. I asked Liyema to take me to the

hospital to see Bonga. I wanted to tell him that I forgive him too. Liyema refused and told me to write him a letter too so I did. I wanted to tell him to his face but I guess I will do that one day when my husband has cooled off. later on we will we will be going to Mtata and tomorrow to Liyema's family so that I can be officially welcomed to their family. I'm a nervous wreck. His grandmother has been calling to ask how I'm doing because he had to tell her what happened because everything got delayed because I was not well for a few

days after the attack. I thought she would say I'm wasting the family's time but she sounded so thoughtful on the phone when Liyema put her on speaker phone. My mother's cousin will be the one to "hand me over" to my new family because she did not have any sisters. Mrs E is in Mtata already with the boys. I miss my babies so much. Liyema and his uncles have left already too. I was busy packing my stuff when Makhulu came in.

Makhulu: "I'm so proud of you. You're a mother and now you will officially be a makoti," she smiled.

Ntombi: "Any tips?"

Makhulu: "Families are not the same, my baby. All I can tell you is that not all will like and want you there but you need to remember that you married their son, not them,"

Ntombi: "Aren't they a part of the package?"

Makhulu: "Yes like we are a part of your package but we will not go out of our way to meddle in your marriage. Marriage might not be easy but when done with the right person it all becomes worth it. When you get to your in laws just be yourself. If they don't like

who you are then okay but don't you dare allow them to disrespect you, Ntombi. Make it clear from the start that you won't tolerate disrespect,"

Ntombi: "I'm scared, Makhulu," she smiled and hugged me.

Makhulu: "It is all normal. If they are like your mother in law and husband then you have nothing to fear. Mother in laws and sisters are usually the ones who make life hell for a makoti but your mother in-law loves you. That should make things a bit easier. In a few years time you will know them all so well and

when Lungile brings his wife you'll be the one to hold her hand.

Everything will work out well," she said while rubbing my back.

Ntombi: "When they do treat me badly. Do I go to Liyema with everything," she laughed softly.

Makhulu: "There are big issues you should bring up with him should they truly hurt you. He is the one who took you to his family so he is obligated to protect you from them should there be a need. But there are things you will be able to handle yourself that he will be shocked to learn

about on your twenty years anniversary," we both laughed.

Ntombi: "What were you like when you were taken to Tamkhulu's family?"

Makhulu: "Whuuu, my baby my journey was a tough one. I was verbally abused by my mother in-law. After I've cleaned she would redo it again calling me useless. What made it worse was we lived with them for the first three years of our marriage. I did not tell your grandfather about it because I was taught that a woman hold the knife by the sharp end. I nearly died young so

I will not give you that advice. If something is beyond you, tell your husband,"

Ntombi: "But I don't want to be seen as a weakling,"

Makhulu: "Trust me he will appreciate it. The last thing he wants is for you to suffer and end up having a stroke. Tamkhulu said I should have told him and that made me realize that our husbands don't know what their families do to us in their absence. It is up to you to let him know so he will put a stop to it,"

Ntombi: "I hear you, Ma and thank you for your wise words."

They have not made me less scared but I will remember them.

Mkahulu: "You started off on a good foot. You gave them four boys. If that does not earn you some points I don't know," we both laughed.

Ntombi: "Points?"

Makhulu: "In-law are strange people, my dear,"

I pray they are not too strange. I don't think I can deal with being hated for no apparent reason. Liyema and I decided to have the big traditional and perhaps white wedding once I've

finished with my studies. I want to help him with the costs and I'm sure after the lobola he does not have money to spend on big weddings. We are already married and our families will have to wait a few years before they can celebrate with us official. Our wedding was perfect with just Jake as a guest. After everyone finished packing their bags we made our way to Mtata. My tummy felt weird due to the nerves. Liyema called to ask how far we were. I knew he was just using that as an excuse to check up on me. Makhulu made sure

that I have all the appropriate clothes a new makoti will need. I still can't believe I will be a makoti by the end of tomorrow. I will finally be allowed to sleep in my husband's arms again. We arrived at our destination quite late. Liyema came to lead the way to the houses they arranged accommodation for us. He asked to see me alone and we sat in his car. I can now drive too but failed my driver's test. I'll try again soon.

Liyema: "Hey," he kissed me passionately and for a moment I thought we would do naughty

things in his car but he stopped.
"Do you realize that it has been
days since I made love to you.
Days, baby," he said and I
laughed softly.

Ntombi: "I miss you too," I kissed
him again. "I'm nervous about
tomorrow, Liyema," he smiled.

Liyema: "Don't be. They are nice
people. My makhulu is looking
forward to finally meeting you," he
smiled.

Ntombi: "Did you tell them
everything about Bonga and
Nomvula?"

Liyema: "I would never have done so without speaking to you first and its non of their business. You know I told them we got delayed due to a break in at your house. Tata has kept his mouth shut too. Even if they knew the truth, you have nothing to feel ashamed of,"

Ntombi: "I guess I fear they will think I bring bad luck into your life,"

Liyema: "That is silly. Just be yourself. I won't allow anyone to bully you,"

Ntombi: "Promise, baby?" I said quietly. He kissed me.

Liyema: "I promise," he smiled. Makhulu opened the door and stood there clearly waiting for me.

They do still remember that we are married right? Then why do we need to sneak around? I gave him one soft kiss before saying goodnight to him. I miss him already. I was hoping he would come with the kids but it was too late. I went back inside to try and sleep. I was tossing and turning until my body shut itself down. Makhulu woke me up early in the morning saying it will be good practice for the time I'll

have to wake up early to make tea and porridge for my in-laws. Does a makoti still wake up at 4am? I had some tea before bathing and getting ready for the day ahead. I wore my black and white traditional Xhosa attire. When my family and I got to Liyema's house there where a lot of people. It was as though it was a wedding only to find out that it is a wedding, my traditional wedding. What without even talking to me? We were welcomed so well by his family. We were taken into the huge tent and it was decorated

with traditional black and white that matched my dress. The singing gave me goosebumps. Did this man plan a surprise wedding celebration? I thought I would just come and be made a makoti, not this. Liyema and his parents were standing at the front singing. I forgot all else when I saw him in his black and white traditional clothes. He was bare chested with many blue and white beads hanging over his chest and one around his head. The people in the tent went crazy with cheering and singing when I walked inside. My boys wiggled

themselves out of the arms of the people who were holding them and all came to me. I can't pick them all up so I just hugged them. They then clung to my dress. My babies must have wondered where the hell I was. Liyema walked closer to me with a big smile on his face. I'm sure he could see the confusion on my face. He took my hand and we danced to the rhythm of the song they sang until we got to the front. There empty tables on the front and I'm guessing it was reserved for my family. I looked at Makhulu but she was too busy

singing and cheering to even look at me. Liyema and I went to sit at the main table with our boys clinging onto us as though we would leave them. It was a lot of fun and was beautiful but I was not expecting it at all. Even Mrs B, Zim and her husband are here. I waved at them and smiled.

There I was in a tent with most people being complete strangers with no idea of what is happening. We sat down and an elderly man welcomed everyone, especially my family.

Ntombi: "Baby, what happened to doing this only later on?" I looked at Liyema.

Liyema: "I was just as shocked as you are, baby. Last night when I came home from where you were, I found some men setting up the tent. It seems my grandmother and mother were just not happy with not having a celebration.

I'm sorry for not telling you. I feared you'd get overwhelmed and not want to come,"

Ntombi: "Well I nearly turned around and went home when I saw these people," O looked at him.

Liyema: "And what stopped you?"
he smiled.

Ntombi: "I love you thank your
ancestors that I do," he laughed.

Liyema: "I love you more and you
look so beautiful, my Xhosa
Queen," I blushed.

Ntombi: "You look handsome too,
King," he kissed me and everyone
cheered. I have never in my life
blushed that much.

Why did he kiss me? Once the
speeches from the elders from
both our families were done they
made us walk down the road so
the community can see that we

are married. I held his hand while we led our guests who were singing behind us. It was too magical. It was all going well until I saw Zingisa or at least someone who looked like her between the crowd. It seemed she was with Liyema's cousin sister. I guess I'll be in her shadow in this family just as I feared. I don't think Liyema saw her. We went back to enjoy the food that was cooked by the local women of the community and other daughter in laws of the family. After the celebrations it was time for me to go and change. I was dressed in my

makoti attire in the blazing hot African sun while sitting on a grass mat. The cool feel of the tiles on my bum felt great because I was sweating underneath the towel and checked blanket I had on. My black doek was half in my eyes, almost covering them. A sheep was slaughtered and I got fed a special part made for a new makoti. It did not taste great but it was edible. I sat on the mat with my head bowed listening to the elderly women give me marital advice and some wise words and tips to use as a

married woman. My bum had started to feel numb. I was given the name Lakhawe because by me being a part of the family it has grown not just because I joined it but I came with four other people too. I loved the name a lot. I wish Lulonke gave it to me herself but at least she was honored somehow. Liyema was called in and was told what my new name is as if he did not know already. Then my husband went and did the unthinkable. He went to get a pillow for me to sit on. Why Liyema, why? I could not even talk to him about it so I

lifted my bum off the mat and let him slide the pillow under my bum. I think he has just dug my grave in this family. I will forever be known as the softly now. More words of wisdom were given to both of us. His grandmother asked that I please go and make tea for them once everything was done. I gave Liyema the death stare. How dare he? It was considerate of him but it was not the right thing to do. Sis Nomtha who was one of the senior makoti's in the family showed me where I can find everything. There were other makot's too

but they were busy with other things. I made the tea and coffee for my husband's family and served it to them while kneeling on the floor. I did not want my butt to be in one's face while serving the other. I left them and went back to the kitchen to keep myself busy and to ask sis Nomtha what I must do and what time the family has their breakfast so I would set my alarm in time. When I was about to walk into the main kitchen I heard voices. It sounded like Feziwe and Kholeka, Liyema's cousins talking. They

were the ones I saw walking with the lady that looked like Zingisa.

Fezi: "I don't know what Liyema saw in her. She is not even beautiful," she said. Her words cut deep, very deep.

Kholi: "That he would leave a beautiful yellow bone like Zingi for Miss Dusty," I felt like crying.

Fezi: "I heard she dragged him to court so they could get married in secret. How desperate can a person be?"

Kholi: "Mntase, the way she came into his life clearly shows that

she planned everything. Where have you heard a man ends up marrying his surrogate mother? Witchcraft I tell you!" they laughed. I did not want to stand and listen but I wanted them to get out so I'd do my work. I could not cry and look like a weakling.

Fezi: "The last straw was the pillow, mtase," they laughed out loud. Why did Liyema even do that? "I want to know what she fed him so I can get it for my man. He did not even do that for Zingisa. Zingisa was a winter makoti and sat on those cold tiles and not once did he bring her a

pillow but miss Dusty is a summer makoti who got a pillow,"

Kholi: "The damn makoti clothes don't suit her anyway. I always thought dark skinned women were not as beautiful in them as light skinned ones,". Someone cleared their throat behind me.

I looked behind and found Liyema's granny standing behind me. I was about to explain why I stood outside the kitchen door eavesdropping instead of helping the other ladies when she took my hand and led me inside. I'm sure she is going to tell me to never ever listen to the

conversations of the family again. I was shocked to find Zingisa standing with the girl. She even had a head wrap around her head. They all suddenly went silent. It was so awkward and I just wanted to go home.

Makhulu Elephant: "Feziwe how old are you?", she asked while looking at Fez. Fez stood with a mouth full of teeth. "I asked you a question," she added.

Fezi: "Forty, Makhulu," she said softly.

Makhulu E: "And you would know how uncomfortable sitting on the

floor for hours is because you've been a makoti, right?" she asked sarcastically

Fezi: "I have never been a makoti, Mkahulu," she said softly.

Makhulu E: "So what gives you the right to talk like that when you've never known what it feels like to sit on that mat for hours listening to elders go on and on? If I ever hear you talk about what Liyema did for his wife, HIS WIFE!, not yours, there will be trouble. Kholi how are you?", she asked. Kholi looked away. I just stood looking at the grey

kitchen tiles while her hand was holding mine.

Kholi: "36, Makhulu,"

Makhulu E: "And you would know what kind of a woman makoti clothes suit best because you've been a makoti right?", she asked sarcastically.

Kholi: "I've never been a makoti, Makhulu," she said quietly. Clearly in shame.

Makhulu E: "Then I never want to hear you speak about things you know nothing about, my children. Let that be the last

time. And you why are you here?", she looked at Zingisa.

Fezi: "There is no divorce in our culture, Makhulu. We invited her," she said. Makhulu laughed while looking to the ceiling.

Makhulu E: "Get married first and come talk to me about marriage and what is allowed or not. I don't mind you inviting your friend but she is dressed like a makoti of this household when she knows she is not. My girl, your journey should have ended where the rest of the other guests ended, at the tent. Now you are in the Elephant kitchen like you still belong here,"

Kholi: "But, Makhulu," she said in a mumbling whisper.

Makhulu E: "I will slap you, Kholeka," she pointed at Kholi.

"Why did you not tell your friends that your family returned our cows? Not because we asked them back but because they could not live with the guilt of keeping them after you shamed our son. That, my dear mean there is no relations between your family and the Elephants. You are a guest here, and what is happening here is for family. Go outside and dance with the rest of the remaining guests and take your friends who

invited you here with because my son's new wife wants to use the kitchen," she ordered. "Stop following Liyema behind, man. What have you brought to this family that can make us be proud to have called you one of us?" she said while looking at Zingisa. There was complete silence. I wanted it all to stop. "Nothing! You gave the Hlubi clan shame full stop. Look at this," she pointed at me. "This is a wife. Before she even was one of us she proved it to us by giving us four blessings. Four boys in one day to tell us that she meant business and

made her mark in this family," she added.

I wanted to just be swallowed by the earth and hide. Why should a woman have children, especially sons in order for her to be seen as a true wife in African families? I thought that stopped a long time ago but clearly not. It seems my boys have made me earn some respect in the Elephant family. The three ladies made their way out with tales between their legs. I'm sure I'll be hated more for this. Makhulu E held my chin and raised my head so I'd look at her. I was not sure where to look

but she told me to look at her. The command in her voice was intimidating to say the least. I for the first time had a chance to look at her wrinkled face. She was a beautiful old woman. She only had four teeth in her mouth and I will have to ask Liyema what the story is because I'm sure there is one behind it.

Makhulu E: "Don't cower to his first wife, Lakhiwe. She had her chance and blew it. This is your husband now, act like his wife and tell Zingisa where to get off. I know Liyema already has but

maybe she needs you to be the one to say it,"

Ntombi: "I did not want to cause conflict, Makhulu,"

Makhulu: "It's called not allowing people to step over you. You are teaching them to disrespect you and they will treat you like a mat and step on you. Don't mind those two grandchildren of mine. They did it with all the daughter in-laws here. All they do is bring babies from different foreign men so I think they get envious when they see another woman have something they want. Welcome to the family, Khiwe. Your tea

tastes wonderful. I was actually on my way to ask you to make us more when my ears got fed hateful words from those three," she smiled.

Ntombi: "I'll come get the cups and make more, Makhulu," she smiled and nodded.

Makhulu: "Thank you for the beautiful great grandchildren. No woman has given us so many heirs at once," we both laughed.

Ntombi: "I'm sure, Makhulu,"

Makhulu: "I'm not easily impressed, Khiwe. Ask your mother in law," she laughed

softly. "Oh did we have a rough start but I love her. I just want you to know that aside from those two, we all love you. We loved you just by seeing how Liyema glows before we even met you. Please take care of that soft heart. He is all "I'm a man", she let her chest out in a superman pose and we laughed. "But inside is a softly. He used to stay in doors a lot while the other children were outside. He was always a sensitive child. I'm not saying swallow the shit", she said the swear word in a whisper and covered her mouth while laughing

softly. "If he treats you bad, you tell both families, we will put him in place,"

Ntombi: "I will, Makhula. Thank you for the warm welcome," I smiled.

Makhula: "Don't talk to your mother, she will tell you another story about me when she first stepped foot in this house,"

Mrs E: "You mean like how you once put salt in my tea instead of sugar and many other spiteful things I've had to endure?" she said while walking in and both woman laughed while Mrs E's

arms wrapped around her mother in laws shoulders.

Makhulu: "I did not like how "white" you acted back then, you have since lowered the western ways," they both laughed.

Mrs E: "But, Mama," she looked at Makhulu while shaking her head. "See the woman my son chooses when no pressure is put on him?" she said while looking at me.

Makhulu: "I see and I love his taste," they both smiled while I blushed.

Ntombi: "Let me go get the cups and make more tea. I will be back," they both smiled and nodded. I walked to the door.

Mrs E: "Lakhiwe" I turned to look at her.

Ntombi: "Ma,"

Mrs E: "I just wanted to see if you know your name, my baby," we all laughed.

I went to get the treys and the boys soon followed me like no other. They were so dirty. I guess here they get a chance to play in dirt. The elders loved my tea. I felt so good about myself.

Sis Nomtha told me that I will be in charge of the morning duties. I will have to wake up, make tea for all the elders and then first make soft porridge for the entire household which had 21 people in total for the festive season. And then later also make proper breakfast in from of eggs, bread, the works. Then I'll help the other makoti's with cleaning. Just hearing her explain it to me made me tired for tomorrow already. I helped prepare dinner for over 30 people because some of the guests will only leave tomorrow. Liyema's other cousins helped me

peel the veggies. It seems they weren't all bad. In fact I might have befriended one or two. My mother in law and grandmother in law are true gems. I was too busy to see my husband but at least we are now allowed to share a room so it's on tonight.

Everyone ate and had their fill. We washed the big pots and dishes. My feet were killing me. I must tell Liyema that we must only stay a week or two. I can't spend the entire December holiday like this. I want to spend time at the beach with them before varsity starts. After everyone

had gone to bed after midnight and it was clean the daughter in laws could finally put tools down and go to bed. Liyema myself and the boys were accommodated in one of the decently sized huts in the family compound. I found the boys sleeping already. At least the bed looked big enough for the six of us. I also had to go get a small basin to wash myself. After slaving away the entire day, I was sweating. I had to wash while Liyema sat and watched me as if he was watching TV. He went to empty the basin after I finished and came back to hug my

naked body from the back. I turned to face him and kissed him. We were tired but we both just wanted each other so much.

Ntombi: "What about the kids, baby?" he kissed my neck and I was in another world.

Liyema: "They are sleeping and I came prepared," he said. He went to drag out a single bed sponge and covered it with a blanket. I laughed so much. "I've missed you so I was not about to let those four stand in my way. Come closer so I can show you how much I missed you," I blushed and walked closer to him.

Who was I kidding? I missed him much more. We kept things as quiet as possible. I'm sure we are bad parents for doing this while our kids were sleeping in the same room but we could not help it and this was going to our arrangement for a few more days. We decided to just sleep on the floor and let the boys have the bed. I laid on top of him after making love.

Liyema: "Lakhiwe,"

Ntombi: "Ndlovu,"

Liyema: "I love you so much.

Baby. I'm glad the Elephant

gang knows you. How was your day? I'm sure you're tired," he kissed me.

Ntombi: "I am exhausted, baby but your family has welcomed me well so my day was good. So I love my name," he smiled.

Liyema: "I love it too, Lala." HE SMILED.

Ntombi: "Baby, why didn't you suggest it for Zingisa. I mean when you married her, you thought you'd spend the rest of your life with her and could not have imagined that I would be your wife," I looked at him.

Liyema: "I don't know, baby. I guess I felt she was my family's bride and not mine so I let them name her or perhaps my instincts told me that it was not meant for her. I really don't know," he said while brushing my back.

Ntombi: "Okay I hear you. So tell me where are Makhulu's other teeth," he laughed out and I had to put my hand over his mouth. "Baby, the kids," I warned.

Liyema: "Are you making fun of our grandmother's teeth, Laksiwe Elephant?" he laughed softly. "Well she had a lot of bad teeth. They have not decayed but

they caused her pain so the dentist suggest she takes them all out because she only had four "good" teeth. She told the dentist to take out the bad and leave her good ones the hell alone and she flaunts those teeth like nothing is wrong," we both laughed.

Ntombi: "I love her,"

Liyema: "She loves you. You won the heart of the family matriarch like I said you would. She told me you had some run ins with my cousins but they don't matter,"

Ntombi: "And the pillow, what was the story with that, Ndlovu?" he smiled.

Liyema: "I did not want you to get piles," he laughed softly. "It's just ridiculous that you had to sit on the damn floor for hours,"

Ntombi: "Thank you, baby but you nearly compromised my reputation," he laughed.

Liyema: "I'm sorry. I just wanted these soft cushions to rest on a soft pillow," he squeezed butt and I could not help but smile and blush.

We could not even go for round two because our bodies did not allow it. I set my alarm for super early since I'll be in charge of the breakfast shift. I got up super early while Liyema and the kids were still fast asleep. I washed my face, brushed my teeth and got dressed. I planned on bathing later. I went to the kitchen to get busy. Sis Nomtha did not have to wake up with me but she did, she helped me a lot. She let me do everything but she made sure I did it as preferred by the family. I was still sleepy and wanted a strong cup of coffee. I

served the elders their coffees and teas and some asked for the scones that were left yesterday. When I was done I went to cook maize meal soft porridge which I served to the entire family, well those who were up already. At about 10am the entire house was up and I made them all, eggs, sausage with toast all while the boys clung to my dress. My poor babies perhaps did not understand why mommy gave everyone but them attention. Usually when I'm around mornings are theirs but not now. Liyema got them all fed and bathed and

I could just kiss him. Not that he needs to be rewarded for looking after his children but in such situations the husband does not have time for taking care of babies because he was busy talking to other men. Liyamea did join the other men after he got them ready though that's why I could just kiss him to say thank you. I think woman need some Act to protect them against the makoti duties though. This is torture. Most of the woman were in the kitchen when Zingisa walked in looking...different. She had no make up on and her skin

had some dark spots. Her hair was also a bit of a mess.

Zingisa: "Where is my make up and weave?" she said rudely while looking around. "Kholi did you take them?"

Kholi: "I gave it back. Wow you look so different without it, Zingi,"

Makhulu: "You mean ugly like her heart is?", she sipped on her tea. She loves tea, my tea.

Mrs E: "Ma!", she said softly.

Makhulu: "I know I said what you all were thinking, so thank me. We do not know where your clay

and horse tail is," she said calmly. Zingisa left in a rush. I had better treat Liyema right or I might find myself like Zingi.

Mrs E: "Mama, did you take it?", she looked at her mother in law but Makhulu just laughed softly, flashing her four white teeth and sipped on her tea. "I know how spiteful you can be," she added.

Makhulu: "Lakhiwe, is there more of the scones, Ma Elephant junior," I laughed softly. She just ate breakfast.

Ntombi: "No, Makhulu but I can bake a few,"

Makhulu: "Bake, my grandchild. I just shake when I don't eat scones,"

Mrs E: "Since when?"

Makhulu: "Since I have a new makoti who bakes well," she answered sarcastically

Mrs E: "This is my son's wife. Meaning my daughter, my makoti,"

Makhulu: "Don't start with me. I will bury more of your suits like I did with that green ugly one you came here wearing years ago,"

Mrs E put her hand over her mouth.

Mrs E: "Mama that was my favorite suit. I'm sure you buried that girl's hair and make up too,"

Makhulu: "When it hurt my eyes, I bury it," she said casually.

Mrs E: "People will call you a witch," she whispered.

Makhulu: "My shortage of teeth already make them think so anyway so I might as well have fun with it then cry about opinions of others. I know my truth," she said. she was the chilled and clearly also sneaky person I have met. could she have thrown Zingi's things away?

Now the kitchen was filled with family who lost thing that Makhulu claimed to not like. Now they say she hid them or got rid of them. she just laughed before slowly making her way outside. I know she's not a witch but she is a character that's for sure. I finally had time to take a bath when Lungile took the boys on a car ride to town with him. Being a new makoti is not joke. The work almost never ends. I think I will put my new name in my ID that is how much I love it. I like how the family kids call me "sis Khiwe" and my husband when he says

"Lala". I called my Makhulu to tell her how my first night in my new family was. She was glad to hear no one tried to strangle me which made me wonder what my poor gran went through with her in laws for her to say that. May I be the kindest mother-in law to the women my boys bring home someday but I'm not in a rush for that to happen. I owe them my attention after days of not seeing them. First day of being a makoti down and many, many more are to follow because I'm planning on staying married to their son forever.

FORTY FOUR

Ntombi

I've been at the University of Cape Town for almost two months now and I must admit, I'm struggling to belong. I guess it's because in PE I did not have to struggle so much to make friends. Here I have not made a single one. There was a group assignment where we could choose who to work with on it. I was the awkward one waiting to see if a group was short of members

and would adopt me out of pity. I have not been struggling with my work at all, in fact I've improved and have a better understanding of my course, the problem is varsity is lonely for me. When class is over I usually can not wait to grab a taxi and go home because I have no one to "chat" to. I have not told Liyema this because he will say "you don't need friends because you did not go there for friends". He is right but someone to talk to between classes would be nice. I'm also the only married person in my class. I've seen a few married women doing second

year Financial Management but they attend when I'm on my way home because they are part time students who also work. Xoli said I should go to a group I like and just sit with them. I did that and when I arrived there was dead silence. I guess I'll just have to accept I'll be a loner until I graduate. Home has been great. My boys have grown so much. They are now at Ma Eunice's day care and seem to love it there. The nice part is that it's not too far from Liyema's work. He picks them up after work. I finally passed my driver's

license but I'm still without a car but I don't mind taking a taxi. Marriage is still kind on us. We have those little disagreements every now and then but we have adjusted well to living together full time. I have been redecorating the house bit by bit because I could not stand how "manly" the house looked.

Fortunately my husband does not mind me changing his house, our house. I keep saying "your," when referring to a lot of things like the house, car, money because I still believe it is his and he hates that I think like that so I've

been practicing saying "our things". He has been open to about his finances and has given me access to his personal money. I have not gone on some crazy shopping spree as his mother said I should since it is what she does with her husband's money. Liyema is definitely not broke but he does not have as much money as I suspect his father has. He might know Ma Eunice but he still has to pay for our four little ones at her daycare and it being in town does not make it cheap. He has five people depending on him so I will make my husband's load as

lite as I possibly can. I still shop at the general retail shops and still wear outfits that every other second student have too. I'm not about to allow my husband's money to go to my head. Today is one of those nice relaxing moments where all my afternoon classes got canceled and since I don't have any friends to roam around town with, I decided to go home, take a nap and cook dinner for my family early and wait until the Elephant men come home. It's kind of nice being the only woman in the house. When I arrived home I found my mother

in law sitting on my front door with her head bowed. I knew something is wrong because Mma does not sit on the floor, especially on a dirty place. She is too much of a lady for that. She stood when she saw me come in and her eyes were puffy and red, she had been crying. Lakiwe: "Mma, what's wrong?," tears rolled down her cheeks. "Let us go in," I said while unlocking the door. We went inside and she went to sit in the lounge while I made tea. She later joined me in the kitchen. Mrs E: "I took my chances by coming here. I knew the chances of

anyone being home were close to non. I just needed to go somewhere where there was no Mlungisi and my gossiping friends," she said in her soft voice. I love her voice. One can never tell if she is serious when shouting or not because her voice is so soft. She sounds like a teen. Lakiwe: "Well I'll be here alone all day. Your timing was perfect, Mrs E. Do you want to talk about it?" Mrs E: "Do you have anything stronger, Lakiwe?", she looked at the cupboards. Lakiwe: "No, Mma," she laughed softly but not a happy laugh. Mrs E: "I found your

father's phone this morning. I was about to take it to him at work but I realized that it was not the one he uses. It's the same brand and make but something told me to call it, woman's instinct I guess. I did and guess what he answered my call yet I held "his phone" in my hand. I went through it and the things I found. He has been cheating," she started to cry again. I went to hug her. I did not know what to say. What does one say in such situations?.

Lakhiwe: "I'm sorry, Ma," I said knowing very well it would take

more than sorry to make her feel better. How could my father in law do this? It was only when I gave her a proper hug did I get the alcohol smell from her. She had been drinking. Ma is no a casual drinker, she drinks when she goes on special occasions. But who could blame her? She just found out her husband is cheating. Mrs E: "You find them when they have nothing and help them build an empire only for them to love another with the growth you inspired," she laughed again. A laugh that came from a place of pain. "That is not all,"

she looked at me. "Never mind, my baby. You married just a few months ago. The last thing I want is for you to look at marriage differently," she stood.

Lakhiwe: "Ma, I'm no longer a child. If you want to get it all off your chest then do so, if not then let us go have tea in silence. Just don't go while you're dru...while you are in such a state," she looked at me.

Mrs E: "Please come with me to the doctor to have some tests done. I want to know if I don't have an STD," she started to cry hysterically.

Lakhiwe: "Okay but first sleep

and when you are awake we can go," Mrs E: "I drank because i wanted to have the courage to go. when I'm sober i won't want to go. Please, my baby," I held her fighting back my own tears. I agreed to go with her. I can't believe she drove while under the influence. Liyema called to hear how my day was so far. I had to lie to my husband and tell him I'm on a taxi from the university because his mother did not want me to tell him I'm with her. II drove to the doctor she said she already had an appointment with. We were 30minutes late for the

appointment and had to wait an hour for the next one. I just could not believe Liyema's father. We went in when it was finally her time to see the doctor. I sat and read a magazine when she asked that I go with. I went in with her. She told the doctor what the reason for her visit was. He first did a brief counseling session with her and she was annoyed. He decided to get on with the testing. He went with her to examine her, he drew blood and asked her to go urinate in a cup. He said the tests should be available in a few days. He

recommended a quick prick HIV test. My heart started to pound because she might test positive. Liyema has accepted his status and is happy but I think to hear his mother has it too will not sit well with him. The test was done and we waited for a few minutes, longest wait of my life. The test came back negative, we were both relieved but he explained that she must wait for the blood tests and for the results of the window period when she comes back to retest. I was just glad there was hope that she could be negative. Something told me

there was more to the story. Did he cheat with her friend? She said I should drop her off at her sister's house in Clemont and I did. She called a private taxi for me and we waited in her car for it to arrive. Mrs E: "Please don't tell Liyema about this. He will go fight with his father. Listen to me asking you to keep secrets from your husband when I was the one who advised that you two not keep secrets from each other. I'm such a hypocrite but it's best for my boys to not know. I came to you because I feel safe to be vulnerable with you. I know you're

the one who should cry to me because I'm the mother but I needed to tell someone before I poison him. Thank you for being there for me, my baby. I will let you know when the tests are out. I'll be here for a while. I need to feel safe somehow," she said softly. Lakhawe: "I understand why it's best for Liyema to not know, Ma. I don't want my husband to get arrested for assaulting his father. Do you know this woman?," she broke eye contact and I took that as a yes. Mrs E: "I don't think he is cheating at the moment, my baby.

This woman just threatened him by saying if he does not do as she says, she will tell me," she looked at me. "It sounds like an old affair that has come to bite him in the butt but that's all I'll bother you with. I want my boy to come home to a happy wife, not one worried sick about her mother in law. It's not the final time he has done it. I just thought he stopped after he cheated while I was pregnant with Liyema and Lulonke...Oh listen to me going on. I'm sorry," she smiled. Lakiwe: "Okay and now that you know that he did it

again, what will you do?" Mrs E:
"That's why I need to be at my
sister's place until I decide. I
would have forgiven him had it
been any other woman but I
doubt with this one," Lakiwe:
"Take your time to think things
through," Mrs E: "Thanks, my
baby. Your taxi is here. I'm sorry
for taking so much of your time.
I'm sure you came home early to
study. I love you," she hugged me.
Lakiwe: "You did not waste my
time, Ma. I love you too," Mrs E:
"Uhm Liyema's grandma is coming
to attend a funeral this side next
week. Can you please

accommodate her?," Lakhiwe:
"Yes, I'll make sure a room is
prepared for her. Will she be
alone?," Mrs E: "I'll ask her and
tell you. I just don't want her to
call a family meeting should she
see your father and I are
fighting," Lakhiwe: "I
understand, Ma. Does Tata know
that you know?," Mrs E: "He will
as soon as he enters our house.
How is that case of your
stepmother and that thing
going?," she looked at me.
Lakhiwe: "Both cases were
postponed for a new court date.
They found more evidence against

Bonga. It seems murder is amongst them. I don't think he will get out since they denied him bail twice," she smiled. Mrs E: "That's good, my baby. When it is your turn to testify, remind me. I want to be in court," she brushed my hand. Lakhiwe: "I will thank you. Why don't you come stay with us rather? The cottage at the back is not even a quarter of your house but you'll have space there," Mrs E: "Thank you and any other time I'd have come but I really want to keep my children from knowing that their father was unfaithful. I don't want

them to lose the little respect they have left for him. I'll be in good care here. I'll come visit when Makhulu Elephant is here," the taxi driver hooted. "Go, go before he drives off," she kissed my cheek. I first went to the door with her to say hello to Liyema's aunt before getting on the taxi. I hope this will not be the end of a 34 year marriage. But if Mrs E is unhappy in the marriage she should leave him even if they were marriage goals. When I got home the first thing I did was go on my knees and pray for my mother in law. Liyema's

church people are nice people but I think there were a few ladies who hoped they would be Mrs Elephant so I got a few dirty looks when the Reverend introduced me as Mrs Liyema Elephant. They will just have to suck it up because I'm not going anywhere. I cleaned my house in peace too. I don't know if I want or even need a domestic worker but I can't get all the work done so I think I might have to talk to Liyema to get us one. We still make use of the nannies after hours when we want to go on date nights. They found new jobs

but the extra money helps. I was suddenly bored after all the chores were done. I started to regret agreeing to the boys going to daycare because I'd have people to play with. Liyema thought it's best for them to learn social skills and support Ma Eunice in the process. I thought they were too young but then Ma Eunice sent videos and I saw how happy they were with other kids their age instead of being in the house with grownups all day. I went to Liyema's little corner that he turned into his office space. I saw two huge files and it

had the company logo on it. I wanted something to take my mind away from Mrs E so I opened it. It was a files containing their finances and payroll details. Why don't they have this in a computer system or something?. My mind knew that reading it was wrong because they are confidential and I was not a part of the company but I'm studying Finance so seeing real data was like discovering a treasure. I took the heavy file to the kitchen so I'd have more space. I made myself coffee and went through it. It was like I

was having a career orgasm but I had no career yet. I started to make mental advices on what investment move would have been better and what not but when I went in a bit deeper things did not make sense at all. I went to get my textbooks and was not sure what I was doing. The textbook did not help much but my mind told me that some things did not add up at all. The company was making money but something was off. I took the company balance sheets and also the bank statements. I sat there for hours going through them. I

kept making coffee to sip on while I was reading. The door flung open and there was suddenly too much noise. Is it time for them to be home already? I checked the clock and they were home on time which meant that time went on too quickly. I was about to tidy everything up and take the files back when the papers fell and flew in all directions. I silently went on my knees picking them up when I felt someone climb on me and another and then another. These kids will break my back someday. I gently got them off me and hugged them and my

heart was on my throat when Liyema picked up the rest of the papers. He looked at them and then at me. I'm in trouble. I stood to kiss him and he actually kissed me back. The kids did not allow us time to talk because they created chaos and the house was a mess soon enough. I did not even get to cooking dinner early because I had my nose in business that does not concern me. I whipped up quick dinner and we ate. The kids had bath time and soon went to bed. They don't sleep at the same time these days like before. Before we would read a

story and they would fall asleep minutes after each other but not lately. Liyema read them a story while I was busy cleaning the kitchen. He came down after a long while and hugged me from behind, I love those type of hugs. Liyema: "So would my beautiful wife care to explain why she was going through confidential stuff?," he kissed my neck a few times. At least I knew he was not upset. Lakhiwe: "Your wife got curious to see what real company finances look like. Baby, I hope you guys have a digital system for those," he laughed.

Liyema: "We are not dinosaurs. We have the information on the system and on paper. I just decided to check them old school style. You smell good," I looked at him. ' Lakhiwe: "That is just soap, my man. Have you had time to check your files yet?" Liyema: "Honestly, I'm not even in the mood but I will check them. Lakhiwe: "You should, baby," I insisted. Liyema: "I'm not too clued up on it won't even try to act all smart in accounting that's why I hired people to do it," Lakhiwe: "I've been checking your balance sheets and bank

statements and some things just don't add up," I turned to face him. Liyema: "Such as?," his smile faded. He actually looks more handsome when he is serious. Lakiwe: "They don't match. Your books show that you have been making a certain amount of money yet the amount on the bank statements are not the same, they are lower. I first thought it's only with last month's statement because it would have meant there was an error made somewhere or perhaps a client paid by check and the money only reflected in your bank after the

bank gave the statement but when I when looked at the previous months, it had actually been going on for a few months now, baby. You are making money because your clients make their payments but what your people entered in the company books and what the bank statements say are different and no where in the next bank statement has the missing capital reflected. So where is it?" Liyema: "So someone is stealing money from us, the company?" I shrugged. Lakhiwe: "I could be wrong, baby but your books just are not balancing. Also

I realized that you donated money for a charitable cause every month. The company donates to the foundation twice a month. The name of the foundation is the same but they have two bank accounts. The money was donated to two separate accounts. I checked on Google for their website and found their banking details should people want to donate money. One of the accounts you donate to is the right account but the second was to a completely different bank account which is strange because they only have one

account on their site," he did not even blink while I spoke. "There are discrepancies in your cash flow. It's important to check your books even if you are CEO and have people handling that, baby. Make time to go over them. But like I've said I could be wrong. I mean I'm just a second year student but have your accountants look at it, just to be safe," Liyema: "Someone is stealing money from me?," he looked confused. Lakhiwe: "Or your unqualified wife just got it all wrong," I laughed softly but he was not. Liyema: "I'll be right

back, baby. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll be in the room making a few calls,"

Lakhiwe: "Okay," he kissed me and ran upstairs. The last thing I want is to make him worry about nothing but something tells me there is something. Like the saying goes "where there is smoke, there is fire". I'm hoping I'm wrong though. Who would steal from their employer, someone who help you feed your family? I made him tea and went up with it to the room. I found him passing up and down talking on the phone, he was angry too

because he was shouting at the other person. The papers were all over our bed laid out. I put the cup on the bedside table and listened while he spoke to who I assume is one of his accounts guys. He ended the call and looked at me. Lakiwe: "Liyema, don't go shouting at your staff on information you got from someone who is not even a professional yet, baby please. I still have a long way to go before giving financial advices," I said in a whisper. Liyema: "I checked what you're talking about and you're right, Lala. I think some bastard is

biting the hand that feeds them. It has been going on for months. My business has lost a lot of money because of some damn ungrateful bastard. I'm talking big money here, Lala. Shit man and then Vusi is not answering his damn phone either," he said while looking at the pages on the bed. Lakhiwe: "It's late, Liyema. You guys need to learn to personally check your records and the bank's records together with your accountants. You guys need to reconcile your bank statements. Should there be a payment recorded in your books and it does

not reflect on the bank statements make note of it and check if it shows on the next statement. It's no use focusing mainly on bringing and keeping clients with deep pockets if someone in your company is poking holes in your pockets. I ju..., "

Liyema: "I heard you, Lakhiwe! I heard you say I should be more involved when we were in the kitchen already," he shouted while looking at me. My feelings got hurt. I decided to turn around and just get out of his face. He ran to stand in front of me. I was very close to crying. He titled

my head up so I'd face him and kissed me. Tears just rolled down. I'm such a cry baby. Liyema: "I'm sorry for shouting. I'm just frustrated and angry but not at you, baby. Please forgive me," he wiped my tears off. Lakhiwe: "I'm frustrated with school too, Liyema but you don't hear me shout at you. I understand why you're acting like this though. You're working hard to build your company," Liyema: "What do I do now?" Lakhiwe: "You know the law better, sthandwa sam. Perhaps not corporate law but I'm sure you know, your anger is making

your mind foggy. I don't know what you should do. Mike had an assignment he needed help with so I got to learn a thing or two while helping him. I think you need to conduct an internal audit, baby. Company fraud is a thing. They start small but even the smallest of theft can cost you. Investigate because my knowledge ends with what I told you. I'm sorry I can't help more,"

Liyema: "Are you kidding me? You've helped me more than you can imagine. Thank you. I'll start the investigation process first thing tomorrow. What have I

done to deserve you?" Lakhiwe:
"I'm sure you made some animal
sacrifices," I joked and we
laughed. Liyema: "I'm sorry for
making you cry. Is the tea for
me?" Lakhiwe: "Yeah," he kissed
and thanked me. I don't know
how he can move forward from
this. I just saw something is
fishy while checking his records. I
was always good at accounting. I
got 90% for it in matric and
that's why I wanted to study it
and become a chartered accountant
someday. To remain angry at him
for shouting at me is useless.
When the company loses money, he

loses money and that puts us, his family at risk of bankruptcy. I hope they didn't steal a lot but by the looks of how much he is stressing, it's a lot. Its on times like this when I wish I had the means to really help him financially. He kept on making more calls. He then sat on the bed going through each of the pages in front of him. I went to take my books so I'd be up with him. I hate seeing him stressed. I constantly worry that stress will weaken his immune system. I went downstairs to make him another cup of tea because the

first was left cold. I made myself one too. I saw he was getting nowhere with looking at the files because he has no expertise in accounting and neither did I, not yet. Comparing records is no big deal that's why I figured it out but I can not help more. His employees were not taking his calls. I would not answer if my boss called late at night either. I told him that. I handed him his tea and sat down drinking mine too. I then organized the scattered pages and put them in the files again. To show him that tomorrow is another day. He

didn't have to figure everything out in one day. In the morning he'll think more clearly and will know what steps to take to get the thief, if there is a thief.

After we had our tea I gave his shoulders a nice massage. He needed it. It does not take the stress away but it calmed him because he laid on his back after that instead I'm pacing up and down like a headless chicken. I laid next to him and he put his arms around me. He was in no mood to talk so I sat with him in silence. Makhulu said that when the world is against my husband and

nothing seems to be going right, I have to make sure that I'm his peace. I found myself thinking about her words in this situation.

FORTY FIVE

LIYEMA

I looked at Mrs Danke, the independent auditor I hired to work on this case of embezzlement. It's been a week of hell but I can finally put everything behind me after this meeting. She told me that I've been a victim of accounting fraud,

payroll fraud and other things which I expect to hear. She explained to me how the culprit managed to take money without me noticing. What I didn't expect is the total amount of money the business lost because of this. We lost R960 600 in total. I was thinking maybe R400 000 but not that much. How could I not notice so much money going missing? Was I so preoccupied with family life that I neglected business? I felt like the fool of the year. Do I watch deserve to call myself CEO? . I felt a sharp pain come from the back of neck

and shot right to the front of my head. My forehead was throbbing. I had to stand to take a sip of the ice cold water that was on the tray my receptionist brought in. She asked if she should go on and I said yes I'd rather hear everything now and deal with it then deal of it in stages. She told me that one of the junior accountants were involved which I expected. I knew someone in finance was the culprit but what I was not expecting is to hear that this employee was working under the instructions of Vusi. All the accounts the money was sent

to belonged to Vusi and his other business ventures I had no idea he even had. I walked out before she could even finish. My head felt like it was going to explode but I was not about to let a headache stop me from confronting that bastard. Does he know the damage he has done? I borrowed an employee's car because I've been leaving ours with Lakhiwe so she'd pick up the boys since I've been coming home late at night. I drove the poor car with such speed and aggression until I arrived at Vusi's complex area. When I arrived I found some

guys loading his furniture in a truck. I saw him at the door and went straight to him. I pushed him inside, locked the door and beat the hell out of him. I trusted him with my life. His nose and mouth was bleeding. The men outside were knocking on the door but I wanted to teach this thief a lesson. I pinned him against the wall. Liyema: "You do me like this now, Vusi? After the shit we've been through to make this company a reality, you do it like this?," I shouted. His tears started to roll down and he started to cry hysterically. I had

to watch his bloody, snotty and ugly face while waiting for him to explain himself. "You want me to feel sorry for you after you almost took a million rand from the business, huh?," I shook him and he cried more. Vusi: "I'm in tr...trouble, bra. I'm sorry," he cried while wiping his snotty nose mixed with blood with his white shirt's sleeve. Liyema: "Enough for you to fucken jeopardize the lives of the people who depend on us for salaries? Fuck that, Vusi! People depend on us, man. I have a wife and four children who depend on me. Not all of us live

just for ourselves like you fucken do," I strangled him but I stopped and let him go. He sank to the floor and cried like a pathetic old man. I couldn't even look at him. How could he? Had Lakhiwe not noticed something he'd have gone on and bankrupted us. I love this guy a lot. I don't know how many years he's been in my life but it's over twenty yet he does me like this? I sat and my head was just heavy. Vusi: "Look around, bra...I have nothing. They took my furniture and tomorrow I should be out of here because they sold the house

too. I'm fucked..." Liyema: "Don't tell me that shit hoping to get pity out of me. You are in trouble you come to me, you don't steal from me and yourself dammit," I pointed at him while shouting. My vision got a bit blurry but it returned. Vusi: "I've got a huge gambling debt, bra. I thought I'd borrow money from the business and then return it once I'm done paying," I went to him and lifted him up against the wall. Why do people always test good people? Liyema: "Your loan has caused a lot of trouble for the business. When would you

have stopped, Vusi? You let me go on leave making me feel guilty for leaving most work in your hands but meanwhile you used it as an opportunity to take from the very thing that feeds us? You're a damn thief!" Vusi: "Will you get me arrested?" Liyema: "You've got no right to ask me that right now. At this moment I feel like beating you into a coma but the thought of my wife having to bail me out because of your selfishness is not allowing me to. Don't step foot at work. You only go there when I say so," Vusi: "Liyema, bra you're my only friend. Please don't

turn your back on me now," he cried. Liyema: "I'm too angry to feel pity for you. I'll go before I do more damage. Give me your damn access card," I looked at him. Vusi: "Liyema, bra please," Liyema: "Your damn access card and keys to the office," I looked at him. He pointed to a bag that was on the floor and I went to take his access card and keys. The sight of him repulsed me. His house had nothing. The only thing there was, was the plastic chair. Why didn't he come to me? I need to calm down first before I can think about understanding his

reasons. I knew he went to the casino but I didn't know he was an addict. To accumulate such a huge debt? This has done so much financial damage and I might have to lay off some employees. To put your cars, house and furniture as means to pay was dumb. Vusi is a dumb ass for this. I hate him for doing this to our friendship. My head was still giving me hell. I drove off going back to the office to meet with my lawyer so he can sort this out. My neck started to feel stiff and my head became worse. Next thing I drove into a robot

poll. The car didn't have airbag. I hit my head on the steering wheel and it was lights out. I woke up with a slight headache but compared to the one I had earlier, this one was nothing. I was in hospital. A male nurse walked in. Liyema: "How long have I been here?," Nurse: "About 30minutes," Liyema: "Good, that means you can discharge me without letting my wife know," I pleaded. Nurse: "That's not my call to make, sir. I'll go call the doctor for you," he smiled and walked out. Lakiwe would kill me. The doctor walked in and I

begged him to let me go but my wife rushed into the room before I even had the chance to hide or something. She didn't shout at me. She just wanted to know how I feeling and asked the doctor how I'm doing. The doctor examined me and said it was okay for me to leave. Lucky, the man whose car I crashed came but not to insult me but to check if I'm okay. We exchanged insurance details and I could only pray the insurance will pay out because I can't afford to fix his car cash. The hospital called Lakhive but couldn't get a hold of her. She

was in class but rushed here as soon as she heard what happened. We drove in complete silence and I wanted to know what she was thinking.

Apparently I was too stressed and my body couldn't handle it. We finally arrived home, it was almost noon so we still had a few hours before having to take the boys. She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened her door. Liyema:

"Lala," I held her hand. She looked at me and sank back into the seat. "I know you're angry. I did n..." Lakiwe: "Upset, Liyema? You th...you think..." she could not

finish because she started to cry. I unbuckled my seatbelt to get closer to her. I held her while she was crying. She pushed me away and hit my chest a few times but then clung to me and cried. "I was...I was scared, baby. I saw the missed calls from the hospital but I couldn't call back because I was in class. Then I listened to the voicemail they left while in class. I didn't even think twice. I left in the middle of a lecture. You scared me, baby," I kissed her forehead. Liyema: "I'm sorry. I just don't know what happened. I had a headache from hell and my

neck had started to stiffen. Vusi is the guilty one," she wiped her tears off and looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "Are you sure? Why? Why would he steal from his own business?" I shrugged. Liyema: "Something about gambling debt. When I got there his furniture and cars were being taken away. He has to be out of the house tomorrow," Lakhiwe: "It sounds serious. Maybe you shou..." Liyema: "Baby, I love you and I respect your opinion but please don't ask me to understand why he did it. I'm not ready. I just want to get inside and hold you. It's been a

shitty day," she nodded. Lakhiwe: "Everything will work out, you'll see. Let's go inside so I can hold you," she smiled and was about to go Liyema: "Hey," she turned to look at me. I kissed her. I don't know what God saw in me that made Him think I'm worthy of one of his most precious creations but I'm grateful. We went inside and the first thing she said I should do is take a relaxing cool shower since its hot. I suggested a cool bath for two instead. The two of us got into the bath and to sit between the warmth of her thighs and feel the cool

water on all the other parts of my skin felt great. I looked up at her. She was brushing my head with her fingers. She looked at me and smiled. We shared a long, love filled kiss and everything seemed a bit better. She told me to let the lawyer deal with this because I'm too involved personally with the guilty party. Liyema: "I wanted to buy you a car this year, even if it is just one of those small ones until I can afford you another one but I won't be able to this year, baby," I looked at her. Lakhawe: "It's okay, baby. I don't need one. We

get on quite well with the one that we have," Liyema: "You don't realize what I want to do for you, Lala. I want to have enough to afford you an interior designer since you want to renovate. I want to buy you that gas stove you keep looking at so much at the shop, yeah I've seen you eye it. I want to get you the all white kitchen that the boys will see as a drawing board," she laughed softly. "I want to get you so much. I thought I would at least get you one of those things soon but this will affect our personal finances too,"

Lakhiwe: "I have everything I need already. The kitchen is perfect as is for now. Our stove might be problematic and moody but it makes great food and like I said, our car is perfect. Even if you said we'd have to relocate to the township I wouldn't have seen you as a failure. Your business is still a baby, sthandwa sam but one day it'll be a force to be reckoned with and when that happens I want my car, interior designer and all white kitchen," we both laughed. Liyema: "I grew up watching Ta do everything for Mma. When she said "Mlu, I don't

like my car anymore," I said in a soft voice like my mother and she laughed. "There would be a new car in the driveway waiting for her when she got back from her spa things," Lakiwe: "We are not them and I don't want you to think that I expect all of that from you. Baby, you and I and our boys are happy. You provide for us so well, we lack nothing. I'm happy," Liyema: "I love you," she smiled. Lakiwe: "I love you more. I've drawn up a new budget, baby. No more take aways, we will have date nights here at home, and no spontaneous spendings on

toys. We will cut down on a few things but it won't kill us," she ordered. Liyema: "And the chocolates I usually get you?" she laughed softly. Lakiwe: "Maybe get a cheaper brand, baby but we can't not have chocolate. Your kids have been driving me up the wall. Chocolate keeps me sane," I laughed. Liyema: "My kids?" Lakiwe: "This morning was hell, baby. Banele slapped Bukhosi and it was a proper slap, hand print markings and all. Bubele puked in the car. I had to clean it up at varsity," She went on and on telling me about what she had to

go through. I'm still stressed and messed up by the happenings of today but I decided to listen to my wife for the first time since all this Vusi problem started. She has been amazing. She's taken on extra unexpected responsibilities and she has not once complained nor nagged. She's been listening to me swear at people she does not even know and managed to calm me down after each anger episode. I've watched her get up early in the morning with me. She has been praying for us before I leave for work. I'd come home find the house clean, the boys

bathed and put to bed which is a mission. I find my food warm in the oven. She'd get to study only late at night. I have not appreciated her at all. I will do the things I want to for her. She deserves an entire universe. The budget has helped too because I might have to invest some of my personal money back into the business. Vusi crippled me in many ways financially. I will never trust him as a business partner again. I relaxed and just enjoyed being in my Lala's arms. Every person deserves a Lala in their life, well only those who can treat such a

person right. I love her so much.
NTOMBI when I left the
lecture hall while running to get
to the hospital one of the girl's
said something mean. Something
about being married young and
popping out four babies being for
old people not girls in their mid
twenties. I think they think they
boys were born years apart. I
rushed to my car to go see my
husband so I didn't have time for
childishness. I'm just glad hubby
is alive and well. I can't believe
Vusi did this to him. I only told
him about what the kids did to
mess up my morning but not

about everything that had been bothering me. I missed making love to him. It had been a while and it felt so good to just be in the moment of love and intimacy with him. He knows my body so well. He knows where to touch and kiss more so I'd reach the ultimate satisfaction. I'm free to explore new things with him. I think I'm addicted to being one with my husband. Whether it's a quickie or long steamy rounds. I laid on my back while he laid on his side. My legs were hanging over his. No blanket because it was hot. Liyema: "Tell me what else

has been bothering," I looked at him. He knew me too well.

Lakhiwe: "The trial date is next week, where I'll have to testify against Bonga. I don't think I can do it, baby," he kissed me.

Liyema: "You have too, Lala. I know you've never done something like that but I'll be there and I know you can do it," Lakhiwe:

"They might ask about the abuse, baby and I don't want to go back to those memories again," I said while crying. He held me and kissed my forehead a few times. Liyema: "I'll be there.

When you talk, look at me. I've

got you, baby. No one will hurt you again. I wish you didn't have to do it but you have to. We have to make sure he stays inside for life. I'm proud of you and I'm sorry I was too busy caught up in my own things that I didn't have time to listen to what you're going through," Lakiwe: "You'll be there right?" Liyema: "Nothing will stop me from being in court supporting you, nothing. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?" Lakiwe: "I'm not making any friends at varsity," I said in a whisper. Liyema: "But you don't need any," he kissed my cheek.

Lakhiwe: "I need someone to play with," I sulked. Liyema: "I'll play with you," he tickled me and I laughed. I stood up from the bed because I couldn't take it anymore. He chased me around while we were both naked. I have a crazy man. I got on the bed to the other side and I was laughing so much while trying to get away from him. He caught me and kissed my neck many times.

Liyema: "See? I'll play with you," we both laughed. Lakhiwe: "You're crazy," Liyema: "I am. Let us sit down, friend. I'm tired and a bit dizzy. We sat on the bed. He was

not feeling well and I just had to make a man who had just been in an accident chase me. We both laid back until we fell asleep. Liyema was still asleep when I woke up. I checked the time and it was time to get my babies. I left him a note for when he wakes up. I got ready to head out. All of them ran to me smiling and saying "Mama". They can be such little drama kings sometimes but I love them. What happened this morning was forgotten when I hugged and gave them each a kiss. Ma Eunice helped me to get them in the car and we had a

brief chat with her before driving off. When I got close to the house I saw Mma's car. I stopped next to it and she was sitting inside looking like a zombie. I stepped out of the car and knocked on her window. She got startled and stepped out of her car clinging to her bag like I was a thief. Lakiwe: "Mma, why are you parked here. Our house is further up," I held her. She shook herself out of my grip. She was shivering but it's hot. The boys were making noise in the car, excited to see her but she did not even look at them. Usually she

pushes everyone aside to hold them. "Mma," I called out. Mrs E: "My GPS gave me the wrong directions. I have to go," she said looking like she was an alien in a foreign planet. Lakhawe: "Mma, Liyema is home. Let's go and you can sit until you're better," she patted my arm twice while still clinging to her bag with the other arm then went into her car and sped off. My babies were crying after her. She has not even come back to tell me about her test results. I bribed the crying boys with a sweet each something I'll regret later on. I was worried

about Mma. I drove home and drove the car into the garage because I'm not driving out again. I found Liyema having a conversation with his lawyer. I gave them space by going out to kick a ball with the boys. I was not even sure if I should tell him but then I'll have to tell him the entire story. He had already had a long day and to add on it would drive him into a coma for sure. I left him playing with the boys to go start dinner. I called Mma and she sounded better and said she was just stressed about the affair. I knew something was up

but I let it go and went on with my business. I went to bath the kids while Liyema sorted more things out with his lawyer over the phone. They splashed water all over me. They gave me grey hairs all during one bath. After struggling I finally got them all to sleep. I need a break from my kids. Liyema will have to give me a day to myself once the dust had settled. When I walked out of their room I saw a trail of rose petals on the floor. The smiled to myself. What is this man up to? I followed the trail leading to our bedroom where I found a sexy,

lacy red number on the bed with a note "put me on". I quickly went to the bathroom to freshen up before putting it on. It fit perfectly. I went downstairs to find candles everywhere and rose petals on the floor and a little picnic setting with all kinds of desserts. I was greeted by a tall glass of chocolate that only had an apron on. He literally only had an apron on. He looked at me and asked me to turn around. I couldn't even finish my slow twirling because he was all over me. I was kissed and passionately pinned against the wall. Oh this

man! I took off the apron and I loved what I saw so much. I took out a condom from my bra and put it on myself while looking into his eyes. The look of lust in his eyes made me have a mini orgasm. He lifted me up again and I did not want the foreplay I wanted him inside of me already. He first made me beg for it though and I was too happy to beg for it. I felt him slide in me and he instructed me to look at him. I loved how he commanded me tonight. Tonight was different, it was rough and I loved each second of it. I don't know how

many orgasms I had. Liyema Elephant is doing things to me that make me addicted to him. We enjoyed the fruit and chocolate after. One would swear our day didn't start off bad at all.

Liyema: "Lala, do I show you enough appreciation?" I looked at him and didn't know what to say.

Lakhiwe: "You do, baby. This beats a car any day, sthandwa sam," Liyema: "You put on condoms now?," I blushed and he laughed.

Lakhiwe: "Stop it," we both laughed. Liyema: "I love it," he kissed me. "I love it so much," he kissed me again but his phone

rang. He decided to ignore it but the person would not stop. He answered, did not say a word just listened and then switched the TV on. I was so upset because TV ruined things. The late night news was on and they said the daughter of a businessman was found shot and killed in her flat this afternoon. I don't think either of us expected Zingisa Elephant's name when the reporter gave the name of the deceased. I could see Liyema was shocked. The mood suddenly changed. He looked at me and back at the TV. I can't fault him

for mourning her death. She was once upon a time his best friend and wife and the way she left this life was cruel. No one deserves to be killed no matter the bad they did while alive. I switched off the TV when the news bulletin was over and hugged my husband. Lakhiwe: "You okay?," I asked softly and kissed his shoulder. Liyema: "I'm okay, baby. That was just the last thing I expected to hear today. Wow life is short! She was not my favorite person but damn to go like that. Who would do such?" I didn't have an answer

for his question. We will know who did it after the police investigation. There was no use trying to get back into the romantic mood, the mood was too heavy. A few called Liyema to give their condolences. I did not allow myself to feel insecure. She was his first wife. In fact he should go see her family to pay his respects. I put on my gown and tidied up. He called Zingi's father and promised to make a turn tomorrow. I went to bed leaving him to deal with the loss in peace. Should he want to talk I'll listen. I felt him hold me from

behind while I laid in our bed "I love you so much, today is the day that proved to me how short life is. From my accident to this Zingi thing. Whatever happens, baby know that I love you. I never want you to go to bed wondering if I do because tomorrow is not promised," he whispered before planting a long kiss on my neck. I held onto him and he did too and we just remained that way, appreciating one another because indeed tomorrow is not promised. May Zingisa rest in peace and may her killer/s be found so justice may be served.

FORTY SIX

LIYEMA

Things have settled somewhat now that I have the guilty parties out of my business. What I need is a big contract. I was hoping the client we were pitching to when I had to rush off to get Lakiwe in Dubanville would sign with us because that was a multi million rand deal but unfortunately it was not meant to be. I think me running out during an important meeting made me seem

incompetent, I still don't regret choosing to get my wife that day though. I sat with my team to bring them up to speed with what happened and then we can brainstorm new ways to get new business. We need new business. Lakhiwe was right, we are new and I have been trying to get the big fish but for now I'll focus on getting what I can to keep us afloat. After briefing them I asked if they had anything to add and Miss Buso, an accountant lifted her hand.

Buso: "Sir, I don't have a question. I just want to let you

know from myself and the rest of the team that we appreciate you. We have full confidence in your leadership and know you will stir the ship out of the stormy water," she said with a smile and the rest cheered. My entire team stood and clapped hands, the guys whistled. I did not know what to do with myself. I don't even feel like I deserve such people under my employment after I failed to realize that money was being taken from us. I just sat there and smiled until they sat back down.

Liyema: "Shuuu, guys, I'm lost for word. Thank you for still being here. I know that we have all been forced to take a pay cut until we get back on our feet again. You could have chosen to go work elsewhere yet you are all still here. Thank you for your vote of confidence and I promise I will try my best to stabilize the ship again.

Lucky: "Boss, I was here when we opened those doors and I will leave when you say you are closing them. We will get more clients. Fortunately our current ones have not jumped ship after you

released a press statement. I think this is our chance to put this place in the media and advertising map. We have been playing it safe, so let us go big," Liyema: "I would like nothing more. We have a pitch for next week Friday with a huge cosmetic brand. We get this one we will be well on our way to financial stability and greater heights. So let us brainstorm. I want to hear what those fresh minds think,"

Buso: "I guess that means the accounts people should go away so you can talk to the creatives but before I go, sir. What will happen

now to Mr...,” she could not finish the sentence but I knew who she was talking about.

Liyema: “I can't discuss it with you as yet, Miss Buso but once the lawyers and I have found a solution to this I will let you know,”

Buso: “Okay, sir and thank you for the job enlargement opportunity. I promise to not compromise the company's finances in any way. I will come to you each month once I've gotten our bank statements so we can check if everything has been accounted for. Ayanda kept me in the dark on most things

but now we know why. I will be transparent,"

Liyema: "Thank you,"

Lucky: "Do we keep the students on?"

Liyema: "They are being paid by SETA, so their money is safe, thank goodness. Okay everyone who is not marketing may be excused unless you want to be a part of the brainstorm session. Every idea counts," they all chose to stay.

Something tells me that I have a strong team in this bunch. My entire team sat and we played

with some ideas to put into our pitch for next week. We came up with some good ideas. The creatives remained and the others had to return to their stations. We had a productive morning. I can't believe Vusi put these people's livelihood at risk. Some are wives, husbands and sole breadwinners like myself. Reinvesting my own money into the business was hard to do because I had plans with it but Lakhwe and I sat and talked about it and decided it was best. I'm so thankful that she has a bursary. She has been helping

with the grocery with some of the change she gets from the bursary company. She has been making sure that she is at shuttle stops on time so we could save on taxi money. We have had to change a lot of things in just a few days but we have adjusted. I have a solution to this Vusi issue. I drove to where he said I'd find him living with a friend. I have not talked to him since I confronted him. My lawyer has been the one in touch with him. I got to the house and parked outside the yard. I found him waiting for me by the door. He

looked terrible. He invited me inside and offered me water. I trusted nothing, not even his water.

Vusi: "I'm happy to see you, bra. I've missed chatting to you. I read about Zingisa. My condolences,"

Liyema: "Thanks but this is not a social visit. I'm here on business,"

Vusi: "I have not been arrested yet, so I'm assuming you have not told the cops. Thanks, bra, I would die in jail. I found ways to get the money back,"

Liyema: "You mean you have found a way to steal money elsewhere

to put into my business? I don't want the damn money. It would have been great if you returned the money you took but when I look at you, I can see you have nothing so you will go commit a crime to get it," I looked at him. He looked down, so I was right. "You not only ruined your career but also that of young accounting professional. No one will touch that girl now. Anyway let me get to the business that brings me here. I won't have you arrested. I don't want to kick you when you are already down. Here sign this,"

I handed him a share transfer contract. He paged through it.

Vusi: "You want my shares?"

Liyema: "Yeah take the money you took as payment for them,"

Vusi: "But they are worth more than that, bra. Come on, Liyema," he pleaded.

Liyema: "Jail or lose shares. I honestly don't care which option you take.

Vusi: "I thought you were my friend,"

Liyema: "We both thought so. Now sign," I gave him a pen.

Vusi: "Liye....,"

Liyema: "Sign and get the hell out of my business and life,"

Vusi: "But you won't be able to keep it afloat alone. You know I did my part. There were things only I could do and vice versa,"

Liyema: "True but you also proved to be good at stealing money. Will you sign?"

Vusi: "What other fucken choice do I have?", he signed and initialed each page and I took my pen and documents back.

Liyema: "My wife does not want me to just leave you like this so I have arranged some rehab for you for your addiction. I know this is

more than a gambling debt but I don't want to know more because I have a feeling it is criminal stuff. Go to the therapy or don't go, I don't care. I was doing it for my wife. Sort your life out, man. This is not you. Had I not been a family man, I would have gotten my hands dirty and try to help you but if I'm right and this involves crime, I can't take that risk and put my wife and boys lives at risk. Sort your life out and then we can talk again," I said before I walked to the door.

Vusi: "Liyema," I turned to look at him. "I'm sorry, bra. I'm

sorry," he said and I nodded. I turned around to give him the number of the gambling rehabilitation center and left. I'm not ready to forgive him yet. Maybe had he been just my business partner, I would have let it go quickly but I'm hurt because he was my best friend. He is right, there are things that are not my strong point in business that he is good at. I have a feeling that I did the right choice though. He is involved in dodgy shit. Lakiwe sent me a text and I decided to call her. She picked up after the first ring.

Lakhiwe: "Baby, did you get my text? What do you think?"

Liyema: "To return to school though, baby?," I said in a low voice.

Lakhiwe: "It's only for three months. You will learn the basics of business, baby. You are a smart and intelligent man but you don't really have an understanding of business because you never got lessons on it. Please consider it and it is free, Liyema. Please, baby," she pleaded.

Liyema: "I'll think about it, Lala,"

Lakhiwe: "Don't think too long because the man says people are grabbing this opportunity so the class will be full soon,"

Liyema: "Do you have a six sense?" she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "What are you on about, friend?"

Liyema: "Just now I was thinking about how good Vusi was in most things when it came to the running of the business. The only reason why I was in charge was because I had invested more money and had more shares but he had a Diploma in Business

Management and some other certificates,"

Lakhiwe: "I read your mind," she laughed. "Well you'll have a certificate in business after this. The gentleman said most people who signed up are entrepreneurs so imagine the new exciting people you will meet. They will give free tea and cookies too," I laughed. "So just free everything," she added.

Liyema: "Okay, just sign me up already,"

Lakhiwe: "I already did. Check your emails and the spam folder too just in case because they have

sent you details regarding the times, timetable and such,"

Liyema: "How did you even hear about this?"

Lakhiwe: "I deliberately went out of my way to find it. It will teach my husband to keep track of all departments in his business," I laughed.

Liyema: "I learned a lesson, baby. Damn but you are something else,"

Lakhiwe: "I know and you're stuck with me. Look. Baby I'm not doing this to control you. I just thought it would help,"

Liyema: "That did not even cross my mind. I appreciate that I'm in your thoughts and you have my well being at heart, baby. I'm a lucky man,"

Lakhiwe: "It's the animal sacrifices you made," we both laughed so much. But this woman though.

Liyema: "Growing up in the rural areas have you believing some weird stuff. Let me get to the office, baby. We are preparing for a huge project, huge. I love you okay,"

Lakhiwe: "I love you too. I'm going to see your mom. I'm just quickly buying a cheap scarf to put on my head, luckily I'm not wearing a jean today. I love you too. See you later,"

Liyema: "Can't wait,"

I ended the call and took the road again. I pulled over when I made the call because she would have freaked out if I was on the phone while driving. I think my wife knows what is best for me more than I know what is best for myself. Maybe theoretical understanding on business will help me turn my business weak points

into strong points. How lucky am I to have a woman with both beauty and brains? I will give these classes of hers a chance. I might meet new people in business. I have not told her I'm sole owner of EM Media and Communication. Perhaps I should go back to varsity part time next year to study BA in Media & Communication. I don't know if we will be able to juggle being students at the same time but I'll see. I have been to Zingisa's family home a few times. They know I'm not obligated to act like a mourning husband. I'm

saddened by their loss but I can not do usual "mkhwenyana" duties. I'm a son in law of the Poti family now. They do know they can ask for help anytime though. I still can't believe she is gone. She was annoying but she did not deserve this. Sad thing is they cant bury her because the police has not released her body to her family. I hope she gets the justice she deserves so her family can find closure.

NTOMBI

I've been looking for night classes on business that Liyema could attend for days. I just hope he

won't get bored and stop attending. I advised him to find Vusi some rehab for gambling. You don't leave a friend when they are going through a rough patch but Vusi hurt my man though. I hope he will sort his life out. I liked him a lot. I went into a Chinese shop and bought an ugly pink scarf just to cover my head with since I'll be going to the in laws. I took a taxi and made my way to their place. I put the doek on when I was by the gate. The gate was open so I let myself in without buzzing them. I hope they don't see the pencil dress I

have on as being too tight. Being a makoti is a lot of work sometimes. I was about to knock when I heard voices. The front door was slightly open.

Ta: "Fix yourself up. You have been looking like this since you came from your sister's," he ordered.

Mma: "Well looking nice and elegant did not keep you from sleeping around so why should you care how I look?," she answered.

Ta: "Because I have people coming here any time. I can't have them see my wife like this,"

Mma: "Maybe they will ask and maybe I will tell them the truth,"

Ta: "Hang our dirty laundry out in public and humiliate yourself. I'm going,"

I knocked on the door so it may seem I'm only coming in now. The door opened fully and my father in law stood in front of me looking dapper. Aside from the height difference, Liyema looks like him but my husband is just more good looking. I gave him an awkward greeting. I almost never know how to act around this man. He did not look at my dress so it

must be appropriate enough for their modern minds. He greeted back with a forced smile.

Ta: "I heard about Liyema's money troubles. How is that going?"

Lakhiwe: "He is a smart man so I believe he is handling it very well," I forced a smile.

Ta: "So he won't be begging me to come back to practice at the firm?," he laughed.

Lakhiwe: "His passion is not law and like I've said, Tata he is handling his business well,"

Ta: "Passion won't feed a family of six,"

Lakhiwe: "So far it has been feeding us well, thank you. I have faith in him. He is not going to work for any man ever again because he is his own man," he looked surprised.

Ta: "Own man huh? That is good. Let me go, Lakhiwe. Your mother in law is inside. Tell her to shower while you're at it," he said leaving me wanting to throw something at the back of his head. The nerve of him.

He is actually the only person who refers to them as my "mother

and father in law" I know that's what they are but most people in his family don't add the in law at the end. I went inside to see the person I came here for. I found her standing in front of the open double door fridge. I greeted and she looked so happy to see me. I got a warm, booze small hug. I told her to go up and shower while I made lunch for us. I'm starving. She made me plead but finally gave in. I saw two empty wine bottles and I threw them away. I tidied the kitchen up. This is my home too so I have to be free to clean and cook in it. I

made a quick chicken stir fry. She came down after a long while wearing her black silk gown.

Mma: "Look at you helping your mother," she smiled and came to hug me.

Lakhiwe: "I should actually be ashamed of myself. I live fifteen minutes away yet I have not been here since who knows when,"

Mma: "Arg don't worry. Who would you have come to when I was not here? How are things at home, my baby?"

Lakhiwe: "We are good just miss you. How have you been?"

Mma: "And Liyema's business. Do

you children need money?" she avoided my question.

Lakhiwe: "If we ever do, you'll be the first to know, Mma. So how is one of my favorite queens?" she blushed and laughed, Mma loves compliments so I knew she'd smile.

Mma: "She is feeling and looking like a peasant these days but still breaths. I like this. After Lulongke left us I never thought life would bless me with another daughter to fill that dark void. I don't think Liyema realizes the gift he has given me," I blushed,

Lakhiwe: "I'm the lucky one to have a mother in law who loves me and wants the best for me. And my queen does not look like a peasant. Look at that glow," she laughed.

Mma: ' Stop it, nana. Are you guys still up to accommodating Makhulu?" I nodded while dishing up for us. "She won't stay long. She will leave Monday. I know having family over can cramp a newlywed couple's style. You are at that stage of marriage where you just want to do the deed anywhere and at any time,"

Lakhiwe: "Mma," I blushed.

Mma: "I know that feeling. Enjoy it while it lasts because after a few years the sex goes....," she pointed her thumb down. I laughed. "Nana, are you ever afraid to be intimate with him knowing his status?", she asked. I had to think about a way to answer it in an appropriate way first.

Lakhiwe: "I'd be lying if I said I was not afraid at all. Something at the back of my mind feared that he'd infect me at first but then I remembered the type of man I'm married to. Yes, the condom might someday burst but

that has not happened and I can't not enjoy time with my husband out of fear of that then we might as well have no intimate life at all. Fear would make us both not enjoy it. I sometimes even forget about his status in that moment because nothing matters but him and I showing each other how much we love each other and knowing that I can trust him to keep it safe. So I no longer fear anything," I looked at her and she kept quiet. I assumed I had shared too much.

Mma: "That sounds beautiful. I'm glad you two are enjoying marriage and all it's bliss. Thank you for the lunch, my baby I have not eaten since yesterday but your food brought back my appetite."

Lakhiwe: "You're welcome. So what did the doctor say? You never told me,"

Mma: "I'm clean, everything is clean," I breathed a sigh of relief. I'm so happy.

Lakhiwe: "Are you back home now?"

Mma: "For now it's best I be

here,"

Lakhiwe: "You're not being forced right?"

Mma: "Never, don't worry,"

We sat and talked about general things. I touched on the Zingi case and she did not want to talk about that. I was suppose to have been in court this week but once again things got postpones because new evidence came. How rotten is Bonga? The prosecutor said I might not have to testify and I hope it comes to that. We were just chatting when there was a knock on the door. I went to open. It was an old white man.

I assumed it's the "people" Tata said would come, his business partners but why when he is not here. I let him and Mma come to the door. She did not seem to know him either.

Him: "Good Afternoon, I'm Detective Doherty. I've come to ask Mrs Elephant a few questions,"

Mma: "Two Mrs Elephants are in front of you, so which one?"

Detective: "You, mam but since your daughter in law is here I might as well ask her questions too" my heart started to race.

Mma: "Why?"

Detective: "The murder of the late Mrs Elephant," he looked at us.

Mma: "Are we suspects?"

Detective: "Will it be alright with you if I ask you a few questions, Mrs Elephant?" he asked looking at me. I felt sick.

Mma: "My daughter did not kill that witch,"

Lakhiwe: "It's okay, Mma. Is it okay if I call my lawyer and put him on speaker?"

Detective: "You don't need one, Mrs Elephant. I'm not charging you, I'll only asked a few questions,"

Lakhiwe: "I still want to call my lawyer,"

I don't even have a lawyer. I dialed my husband's number at first he did not answer but I tried again and he did. He will just have to be my lawyer. Mma called Zingi a witch in front of the detective which might make things worse. I can't trust her to help me answer the questions.

Liyema: "Lala, I can't talk now," he said softly. I'm sure he was in a meeting.

Lakhiwe: "A detective Dorothy is at your mom's,"

Liyema: "Doherty?" he corrected me. "Damn is that man still in service. What does he want?"

Lakhiwe: "I'll put you on speaker so he can tell you himself" I put him on speaker.

Liyema: "Detective Doherty, Liyema Elephant speaking. How may I be of assistance?"

Detective: "Young Elephant, it's been a while. I only want to ask

your wife a few questions,"

Liyema: "In connection with?,"

Detective: "The murder of your ex wife. Perhaps your wife knows something,"

Lakhiwe: "Are you going to charge her?"

Detective: "I actually just want to know where she was on the 15th of April at about 16:08pm,"

Lakhiwe: "Oh you should have said so. I was at the daycare picking up my boys,"

Detective: "Can they verify that?"

Lakhiwe: "Yes, the owner, her staff and a few mommies can,"

Detective: "Okay, I'll need their contact details please,"

Liyema: "Will that be all? You heard she was not at the scene of the murder and has an alibi,"

Detective: "Hold your horses. I will have to verify she is telling the truth first but for now that will be all. While you're on the line, Mr Elephant. Where were you on that day?" Liyema laughed in disbelief.

Liyema: "With my lawyer at my house. You can call him. My wife will give his details."

Detective: "That will be all from you two for now. Mrs Elephant senior, you unfortunately have to come with me for questioning,"

Liyema: "What the hell? My mother did not kill Zingisa. Had she wanted to, she'd have done it long ago,"

Detective: "I'm not charging her yet but I will have to take her to the stations,"

Liyema: "Mma, don't say anything. I will meet you there. I'll call Ta to meet us there too,"

Mma: "I don't need him. I'm innocent," she looked at the

detective. "I'll go get dressed and come back down,"

Detective: "Don't do anything stupid,"

Mma: "Like what? Jump down two stories to run away from you? Don't patronize me," she said before running up the stairs.

Lakhiwe: "Is it fine if I drive behind you with her. She has not been good and sitting in the back of a dirty van will make her worse,"

Detective: "I'll allow it. I will wait outside," he walked to the door.

Lakhiwe: "Detective Dorothy," he turned to look at me.

Detective: "Doherty Doh-Her-Tee, not Dorothy," he corrected me. I just nodded.

Lakhiwe: "What reason do you have to charge my mother?"

Detective: "She will know when I get her to the station,"

I kept my mouth shut before I get Mma into more trouble. There is no way Mma could have killed Zingisa. She had plenty of reason when she cheated on Liyema but she did not. Why would she do it now? These people just want to

pin this on someone. Mma came down the stairs wearing a tracksuit and sneakers. It all looked so wrong on her or is it because I've never seen her wearing casual clothes. I did not even know she owned such. We locked the door and got into the car. I drove behind the van and he was driving too fast. I'm a new independent driver. I still follow all the rules of driving I learned but we arrived at the station soon enough. They went in with her and I had to remind her to not say anything just as Liyema said. I sat and waited

until Liyema arrived. I showed him where they took her to and he rushed to go there. I suddenly remembered the state Mma was that afternoon. Could she...? "No, no, no, Lakhiwe you can't think that," I said to myself while I waited. I looked at the time and it was almost time to get the boys. I hope they come out before that because Mma's car does not have car seats and Liyema is inside with our car's keys. I felt so helpless. Some policeman winked at me. I gave him a disgusted look and showed him my ring. He showed me his ring to and

shrugged clearly saying "so?" I felt so disgusted that married people would do such. I went to sit in Mma's car instead.

MRS E

I sat in the cool interrogation room, well at least I think that is what it is. It smelled of nothing. The detective tried to get some answers out of me but I exercised my right to keep silent like my son said I should. He kept on raising his voice and banging the table thinking I'd cower. Does this man know how many times I've arrested as a teen during the struggle? I did

not fear the white police back when I had no rights to lean on. Why the hell would I fear him now that I've got rights. I kept my cool and let him get all worked up alone. I've survived torture of the electric chair a number of times. His damn tactics are nothing on me. Liyema finally came and gave me the longest hug before sitting. I know that he is rusty as far as law is concerned but I trust his legal advice more than I would his father's. He asked if I said anything and I smiled and shook my head.

Liyema: "Why is she here?", he sat and looked at Doherty,"
Decective. "Her finger prints were found on the doorknob of Mrs Z Elepahnt's flat?",he sat down.
"Care to tell us how it got there? Did you go and shoot her in cold blood?"

Liyema: "You don't have to answer that, Mma,"

Decective: "A woman was killed her, Mr Elephant and right now your mother is our main suspect. I suggest that you get her a real lawyer this is serious,"

Liyema: "Then why are you

questioning her without a "real lawyer"?"

Detective: How difficult can answering why we found her prints on the deceased door be difficult to answer?"

Liyema: "Which door is this? I assume this flat has a few doors,"

Detective: "The front door," he raised his voice,"

Liyema: "Were her fingerprints found on any other part in the house, other than the front door's knob?"

Detective: "No," he looked down.

Liyema: "When I was with her father he said she was shot at point blank range. Where did you find the body, Detective?"

Detective: "In the lounge,"

Liyema: "Would it have been possible for a person who stood at the front door to point a gun at the victim and shoot at point blank range because clearly my mother ended at the front door or her prints would have been found in other parts of the flat, not so?" he gave Doherty a death stare.

Detective: "No, it would have been impossible to shoot at point blank range from the front door," he said softly.

Liyema: "Then why is my mother here?"

Detective: "She could have worn gloves."

Liyema: "If a suspect is smart enough to bring gloves in the first place, don't you think they'd have put them on before touching anything of the victim's?"

Detective: "She still has not answered the question," he looked

at me. Liyema wanted to stop me but I told him its okay.

Mrs E: "If you must know, Detective. I was at the deceased house months ago when she came to town to ask her to stop bothering my son. I got to her flat, knocked but she did not answer. I turned her doorknob to check if it was locked and it was. You can even ask her neighbor. If he remembers me, he will tell you what he saw," I looked at him.

Liyema: "Can you prove that the fingerprints were put there on the day of the murder, Detective?"

Detective: "No,"

Liyema: "Then please don't bother us again until you have something concrete to pin on my mother.

Mma, let's go,"

Detective: "You may go now but I'm sure I'll find more evidence,"

Liyema: "You know where to find us should that happen. Goodbye Dorothy," the detective clenched his fist in frustration,

Detective: "It's Doherty," I wanted to laugh but kept a straight face. My husband came into the room looking like he gave a damn.

Mlu: "I came as soon as possible. I hope you did not say anything," he looked at me.

Mrs E: "You can stay but my son and I were leaving. Liyema helped me already,"

Mlu: "You will put your faith in someone who does not even know the law for a damn murder case?"

Mrs E: "Would I be going home if he did not know the law? Let's go, Ndoda. I'm sure Lakhiwe is waiting for you,"

Doherty asked if I was with anyone round about the time they assume Zingi got killed and I told

him I was with my sister. We left the mighty Elephant there.

Coming to tell me that my son does not know the law, the nerve. I thanked my boy and we walked outside where Lakhawe said she was when he called to ask. She was so happy to see me. If I can keep my children from knowing that their father had an affair with Zingisa I will do so. Mlungisi does not deserve the anger and pain this might bring to Liyema should it come out. That bastard thinks that he can do me bad and just go on with life. Does he know who I am? The hug I got from

my daughter was so warm,
Lakhiwe is just warm and even if
I were to die today I would not
be worried about Liyema at all.
They had to go get the boys from
daycare and I kissed them both
goodbye. I miss my bundles of
everything magic but I'm in no
state to be around them at the
moment. That cheating man
whore came out of the police
station. He wanted to talk to me
but I got into my car and drove
off. He followed behind me going
home. The only thing he could go
on about when we arrived home
was why I had Liyema

representing me. Saying I could have incriminated myself and gone to jail. I watched him get his blood pressure up. All I did was sit and sip on my cup of coffee. He does not even care how I am.

Only angry because I did not wait for the "mighty Elephant" to come save me. This man does not know me but soon he will.

FORTY SEVEN

MRS E

I indeed tested positive for HIV. Isn't it sick that both my son

and I got infected by the same person? I got it from her indirectly of course but I feel myself getting sick when I realize that my boy and I were made sick by one source. I hate Mlungisi for this and I hated Zingisa even more. I could not stand to have either one of them go unpunished. Having been a comrade back in the day I have made long lasting, loyal friendships my husband knew nothing about. I did things with these people that we will go to the grave with. Things neither of us regret doing because we had no choice

back then. I called in a favor from a comrade who lives in another part of the African continent. He owed me his life because had it not be for me, he would not be alive today. I told him that I have a problem and needed his help taking care of it. We never went into the details of why I wanted him to do what I asked him to. I told him who the problem was and I knew the job was done already. I got rid of the burner phone I called him on and went on with my life. I was sitting with my sister on the couch when I got a phone call

from Zingisa's mother telling me that her daughter had been murdered. I did act shocked to hear the tragic news. I knew my friend was out of the country again as soon as the job was done and there was no way I could have done it because I was having a glass of wine with my sister. When I drove to Liyema's house I wanted to clear my mind and I found myself driving there. I almost lost it, I'll admit but when Lakhiwe asked me later why I was in a state I told her the affair was getting to me. She believed me because it was

normal for a woman who just found out her husband cheated to lose her mind. I also had the gun that killed Zingisa in my bag because I told my comrade to leave it a secret place before skipping the country again. The last thing I wanted was for Lakhawe to see it. I got in my car to think about my plan clearly. I expected to be a suspect and also other members of my family. I put the gun in a safe place and went home, to my husband to fix things. I had to act like I was crushed by the alleged cheating because he denied it. I accused

him of having the affair with his secretary, not Zingisa after hearing rumors. I had to act broken by letting go of myself. Isn't that what men expect. For a woman to break down because of their cheating ways? I knew the police had no murder weapon and that it would help them solve the murder.

I went to marriage counseling with Liyema's father, it was our second session. He in both sessions he called me crazy for thinking he was having an affair and said the one I know about was the last one. I let it go and we drove

home. We found police vehicles parked in our yard. We both rushed to the inside of the house to see what was happening. The house was a mess because the cops have raided it. Cushions were on the floor and my husband was about to burst a vein. They gave us the search warrant and told us why they were there. It was a part of Zingisa's murder investigation. They searched everywhere in the house until they got to the safe.

Detective: "Please open the safe for us, Mrs Elephant," he said looking at me.

Mrs E: "I don't know the code to the safe, Detective. It is where my husband keeps important documents he brings home of cases so I'm not allowed access since it's confidential," I said looking at him.

Mlu: "You have not found anything. I suggest that you get the hell out of my house before I sue you all," he shouted at the cops.

Detective: "We will leave after we see what is inside here,"

Mlu: "You won't find anything but some confidential work stuff in

here and also my work cellphone, man!" he shouted.

Mrs E: "Tata, open for them so that they can go. I don't want the neighbors calling the press while they are still here. Just open the safe so they see there is nothing in there," I said calmly.

Mlu: "This is a violation of my clients privacy,"

Detective: "Just open please,"

Mlu hesitantly pressed the code to the safe and the detective opened it. I think he feared I'd find out what was on the "work" cellphone. He was taken in for

questioning after the police found his fingerprints in Zingisa's flat but he managed to worm himself out of it by saying he went to welcome her back to town. Inside the safe was his extra cellphone indeed, documents and a gun. I could see he was confused to see the gun. I also stood looking shocked to learn that my husband owned a gun. The police put both the cellphone and the gun in plastic bags and told him to go with them to the station. I went hysterical like a typical wife would when her husband is taken in for murder. I asked if I should call

one of his colleagues but he said he does not need anyone because he knew his rights. They put him in a white car the detective was driving. I drove behind them. I did not call anyone as ordered by him. They took him to the interrogation room when we arrived. I sat and waited like a concerned little housewife. The day Lakhiwe left me at my sister's I decided to go back home but not to stay, only to put the phone where I found it, in his bed drawer. He must have forgotten to put it back in the safe that day or was in a rush. I don't clean

so he had no reason to fear that I'll find it. I knew he kept it in his safe because I've never come across it before that day. I never had an issue with not knowing the code of the safe. I had no interest in the case files he kept secret in there. But after everything happened I had to know the code so I'd plant the murder weapon when the time was right. I sat on the hard police benches for hours. Finally the detective handling the case came out. Mlungisi was handcuffed and taken deeper into

the station. I ran to the detective crying.

Mrs E: "What happened? Why is my husband in handcuffs? Let me see him now!" I demanded.

Detective: "Your husband was charged with the murder of Miss Zingisa Elephant," he said and I acted shocked.

Mrs E: "On what grounds?", I pointed at him.

Detective: "The phone we found had messages of conversations between him and Mrs Z Elephant and she was clearly threatening him. There were replies from your

husband saying things like "I'll kill you, bitch and "you don't know what you're messing with", amongst others.

Mrs E: "So what do you expect a person who is being threatened to say? He must have replied out of anger but did not mean he would actually kill her dammit. Release my husband!" I shouted.

Detective: "I can't do that, mam, sorry. Apart from the phone, we found your husband's finger prints on the murder weapon. His finger prints having been found in her house and on the weapon used to kill her clearly shows that he is

guilty. I suggest you get him a lawyer, a damn good one," he said before walking away.

Mrs E: "Let my husband go now. I will sue the whole of you when he gets out. Let go of my husband," I shouted behind him as loudly as my squeaky voice could. I sank to the cold floor crying. A lady got up from her seat to come hold me.

"Let go of my husband please," I said in a whisper and cried silently. I had to put up an act because people knew me for being a drama queen. Had I not made a scene, I would not have been me. I knew his finger prints would be all over

her house. I'm sure he went there to plead with her to not say anything a few times before her murder. Hearing that he had no alibi was music to my ears because it meant I could go on with my plan. I went back home to him because it was the only way I could get his fingerprints on the gun. Mlu is a deep sleeper so putting his fingerprints on the gun while he was asleep, especially on the trigger was a piece of cake. I knew once he saw the phone was not in the safe, he'd put it back there again to hide it from me. I asked him if he was

cheating but he denied it not knowing I saw the evidence. Now cracking the code to his safe was not easy. I tried every important date I know until I tried the day Lulo dies, it was it. She was his favorite. When I carefully planted the evidence I called the police while in the bathroom at the therapist with a temporary sim card and gave them an anonymous tip off. I'm a law abiding citizen so it was within my right to tell the police about the thug I know of who goes around killing women. I don't know how Liyema knew we were at the police station but he

came rushing in. Lungile followed right after him.

Liyema: "Mma, what's going on? I was called by a friend of mine who works here saying he saw you. I called Lungile so we came over,"

Lungi: "I thought you and Tata are no longer suspects after you explained why your fingerprints were in her house,"

Mrs E: "Your father...your father was charged with her murder," both boys held onto their heads while looking at each other.

Liyema: "Based on his fingerprints being at her house. It was no

secret the man loved his ex daughter in law," he looked at me. "Let me go speak to the detective. Who is his lawyer?" he asked before running off.

Mrs E: "He said I should not call anyone,"

Lungi: "And you listened to him?"

Mrs E: "You know how your father gets when we don't follow his instruction so yes, Lungile I listened to him like I have all these years,' I LOOKED AT HIM. Liyema returned.

Liyema: "They won't speak to me. What the hell is going on?" My

father is arrested for a murder I know he did not commit because he loved Zingzi more than any of us combined, he had no reason to kill her, man," he shouted.

Lungi: "Liyema is right,"

Mrs E: "Lungi, please excuse Liyema and I. There is something he must know,"

Lungi: "No, Mma, I have as much right to know what the hell is going on," he shouted.

Mrs E: "And you will but let me speak to your brother first please," I pleaded. He did not like

it but he gave us space. I took Liyema where we could talk alone. Liyema: "What is going on?" he asked. I knew this was going to break him but he must hear from me that his father was sleeping with his wife. I will not tell him about my status because it would prove that I knew that his father slept with Zingi which would then mean I had a motive to kill her.

Mrs E: "What I'm about to tell you is not easy but I don't want the cops to beat me to it. It was discovered that your father had a motive to kill her,"

Liyema: "The man worshiped the ground she walked on. Even after hearing she gave me HIV he was still hoping I'd go back to her. So I don't believe you, Mma. It must have been one of her many men, maybe one was also cheated on by her but was not as soft as me,"

Mrs E: "Your father was one of her boyfriends, Ndoda," he looked at me for a long while without blinking, he stood and turned his back at me but looked at me again. He was crying. I stood to hold him but he refused my comfort.

Liyema: "The hell?,"

Mrs E: "The police say they have text messages to prove it.

Apparently she threatened him. I'm not sure how because he did not say. "his phone buzzed and vibrated but he switched it off without even looking at it and looked at me again. "I suspect she wanted him to help her get back with you or she would tell us. Your father then responded with threats to kill her and stuff, which I'm sure was fueled by anger, you know how he is. We found the cops all over the house turning it upside down. They even lifted my cat from her bed to

check if she was not sitting on evidence. Then after searching they found your father's safe, the one at home where only he knew the code. Inside was what turned out to be the gun used to kill Zingi and his fingerprints were all over it,"

Liyema: "But why the hell keep it? I suspect he is smart enough,"

Mrs E: "After he managed to explain why his fingerprints were in her house and her neighbors vouched to seeing them together and Zinisa did not look like she feared for her life, they had no

further reason to make him main suspect. I guess he thought since he was the only one who knew the code, no one would find it until he got rid of it. I don't know, I'm just trying to get into his mind," Liyema: "He slept with her? My own father slept with my wife. For all I know he was the one who infected her. You need to go test, Mma," he said and I could hear he was broken.

Mrs E: "I will when I have more information on what is happening with my husband. Even after finding out about this affair, I

care about him," I cried and he hugged me.

Liyema: "I know, Mma. Trust me I've been there and it gets better. Go test though,"

Mrs E: "How are you feeling?"

Liyema: "Crushed, Mma. This has taken me back to the time I found out she was unfaithful and to know my father was one of the men, damn. I'm crushed. I don't even care about what happens to him now, that's how broken I am. I just need...I can't. I'm going,"

Mrs E: "Liyema, don't drive in this state please, ndoda,"

Liyema: "I....," he wiped his tears off quickly before walking out. I heard Lungile call his name out. Both Lungi and I ran after him but he sped off. So much that his tires left black marks on the parking lot's paving.

I told Lungile since he insisted on knowing and he too got into his car without saying a word. I called one of Mlu's partners at the firm and he said he would come as soon as possible. I then called my sister to come pick me up because I could not drive in my "state". Mr Dududmashe, the attorney arrived and he got

access to go see Mlu. He came back after a while saying it does not look good at all. Without an alibi and with the evidence against him, he might go down for murder. I knew that, it was what I was hoping for. He arranged for me to see him. I walked into the room and my husband clung to me like bubblegum on a school desk. I can't remember the last time that happened.

Mlu: "I don't know what is going on?"

Mrs E: "I thought you were having a fling with your assistant

after I heard how you are seen out with her a lot and that was why I confronted you for having an affair. I did not expect you to have had an affair with your son's wife, Mlungisi," I said while crying.

Mlu: "It was a mistake. I don't know why I kept going back to sleep with her but it was a mistake. You were not really having sex with me that time either,"

Mrs E: "So I'm to blame for this?"

Mlu: "No dammit. I'm sorry, Zola. Yes, I agree that she wanted me to help her get back with Liyema

and I tried but failed but I did not mean it when I said I'd kill her in the damn text messages. Someone is framing me," he shouted. The look of defeat in his eyes almost made me feel sorry for him, almost.

Mrs E: "Who might want to frame you?"

Mlu: "I would have said you but there is no way you are smart enough to get such right. No offense," I let him undermine me, that's the whole plan. "I've angered a lot of criminals.

Dangerous people needed up behind bars because of me.

Dammit I don't know what is happening!," he shouted in anger.

Police: "Time's up,"

Mlu: "I'll get to the bottom of this. I'm not going down for something I did not commit,"

Mrs E: "Tell what to do and I'll do it,"

Mlu: "This is way over your head. Let Dudumashe handle. You're just a housewife, who has never even sat in an office. Dudumashe will sort this out,"

Mrs E: "You're right. I don't know anything,"

I kissed his cheek before the cop took him away. Of course what the hell would a housewife know about framing a smart businessman?. I was not lying to Liyema when I said I still loved him but he went to far. Now I just have to spin Lakhiwe a story because she knows that I knew about the affair but not that it was Zingisa. She also knows I've tested so I have to sort that out then I'm home free. Mlu contributed to hurting our son so he must pay. Plus I don't feel guilty for sending him to jail. He had to pay for making me sick

somehow. Dududmashe "the problem solver" looked stressed. I remembered that Lakhiwe has to testify against that pig today. I checked the time and I was a bit late already. I told Dududmashe where I'm going and he said he'll tell Mlu should he ask where I am. I promised my daughter in law I'd support her, so I intend on keeping that promise. I'm sure it's where Liyema sped off to as well. It makes more sense to support his wife than stay at the police station feeling sorry for a man who hurt him. I went with my sister to court. Lakhiwe must

know we love her and are there for her no matter how bad the situation in our own lives might be. She has been such a great support to not only my son but to me as well.

NTOMBI

I was praying so hard that I would not have to testify in court but my prayer was not granted. I guess my testimony is needed. I came early and have been calling Liyema non stop. His phone goes straight to voice mail. I was worried because something might have happened to him. He promised that nothing would stop

him from coming. Mrs B is the only one who confirmed to being here because she picked me up after waiting for Liyema too long. I'm feeling so scared, especially since Liyema has not showed up yet. I arrived at court early as advised. I went to inform the public prosecutor of my presence. She was a young professional who treated me with respect and told me not to be afraid. She read my statement back to me and it was as I remembered. I was called to the stand. Mrs B and Mrs E were sitting in the crowd of people. I even saw Sindi, whom I have not

seen since the last time we parted. I searched for my husband's face but he was not here. My heart was pounding. I looked at Bonga, who sat with his head bowed. I thought I was ready to see him again but I was wrong. I wanted to cry but I held my tears back. I needed Liyema, my safe place. I think Mrs E could see me search for him again because she kept looking at the door and then at her watch. I was instructed to make an oath to solemnly affirm that my testimony will be truthful. I spoke in a shaky voice. I could not

help it, I was scared and close to tears. The public prosecutor stood to question me.

Procurator: "Please state your name for the court,"

Lakhiwe: "Ntombikayise Elephant," I said as loudly as I could so I won't have to repeat myself.

Procurator: "Mrs Elephant, do you know the accused,"

Lakhiwe: "Yes, your worship," I was told to address the court as your worship or my lord. I was not comfortable with my lord.

Procurator: "Please tell the court how you know the accused,"

Lakhiwe: "I was in a relationship with him, your worship," I looked at Bonga who finally looked up. He was badly beaten and suddenly I felt less afraid of him. He looks defeated.

Procurator: "How long did your relationship with the accused last, Mrs Elephant?"

Lakhiwe: "For about five years,"

Procurator: "Please tell the court about your relationship with the accused,"

Lakhiwe: "I...I'm not sure what the court wishes to know," I looked at her.

Procurator: "Give the court a summery of what your relationship with the accused was during the five years you were together,". I looked at Bonga.

This was the moment I needed Liyema most because I'll have to talk about things that hurt me deeply in the past. I searched for his for his face again but nothing.

Lakhiwe: "Bonga...I mean the accused and I first met when I was eighteen years old. A day after I had finished writing my

final matric exam. He was a charming man back then. I had never had a boyfriend but something about him drew me to him. We started to talk and I opened u about how my stepmother...how my stepmother was abusing me. He sympathized with me and was a shoulder to cry on which made me open up to him more. He later suggested that I come with him to Cape Town where he would help me get into university. It sounded like my prayers had been answered. I was not only escaping my situation at home but I was also going to

further my studies so I did not think twice before saying yes. We arrived in Cape Town and for the first year it was good, not easy but good. Even after our shack burnt down with my documents in it, it was okay because he was working hard to save money to replace them. He then left his job as security saying he found something to make him better money. I did not question him. He was the provider so he knew best. Things started to change after that. He had started to drink, bring friends and girls over at the new RDP house he got for us.

When I would confront him about it he would get angry and shout at me. I'd leave him alone. Then he would do it again until when I confronted him, he slapped me...I still remember how my ear buzzed after that slap..." a tear fell down my cheek and wiped it off quickly and kept quiet to collect myself.

Procurator: "Take your time,"

Lakhiwe: "I was shocked because how could the man I love hit me. He did not even give me time to recover from the shock before hitting me with a fist in my stomach while his drunk friends

cheered for him...," I paused due to the crying once again. "Many more worse incidents followed after that. The worst one was when he beat me up until I bled and lost consciousness and blamed it on thugs...I can't tell you how many times I've felt his fists on my body, his slaps on my face. He even threw objects such as knives at me or a cups which would sometimes break when making contact with my head," I broke down and was shaking. The magistrate asked if I could go on and I said yes. I wanted it to be over. I just had to collect myself

first. "I managed to escape from him but he found me and threatened to kill a woman I love so much, Mrs Bam so I returned to him. The abuse continued and there were incidents where he would just demand sex,"

Procurator: "So he raped you?" she asked. Bonga's lawyer stopped her saying it was speculation.

Lakhiwe: "No because I did not tell him to stop,"

Procurator: "But you did not give consent either, right?" I nodded while crying. She asked a few other "easy" questions and sat

down. Bonga's lawyer, Mr Louw stood. I'm guessing he is a state lawyer.

Louw: "Mrs, Elephant, you mentioned that my client abused you. Why didn't you just leave him or report him?"

Lakhiwe: "I was scared,"

Louw: "So scared to free yourself that you chose to stay instead?"

Lakhiwe: "You do not know how angry he got when I went against what he said. He said he had a friend at the police station who would make my case go away. He was also the only person I

depended on, so without him I'd have lived on the street. I afraid of him and of being homeless," His lawyer ripped me apart. He even said that I should be arrested too since Bonga told him that we planned to con Liyema. He basically called me whore in a fancy word for being in bed with the very same man I tried to con. He also said that I should be in jail for stabbing his client because I knew Bonga would come to my father's house before he actually arrived but instead of calling for help. I decided to attack his client. I felt so naked yet I was

fully clothed. There were moments when I raised my voice which was not allowed in court. I cried hysterically in some instances while looking at Bonga's ugly face. There was a moment when I could not even speak anymore because the words just would not come out of my mouth, just endless tears. I was broken. I was taken off the stand when I just broke down in tear. My entire upper body was shaking. Mrs B came to hold me as soon as she could get close to me. I clung to her. I think I even pinched her that's how I held on to her. Mrs

E was also in the comforting session. I calmed down after a long while. Liyema broke his promise.

Mrs E: "My baby, Liyem...,"

Lakhiwe: "Don't say his name, Mma. I don't want to hear his name right now please," I looked at her.

Mrs B: "Can I take you home now?" she looked around.

I was not sure if I was allowed to go home. After a while of sitting outside the courtroom the Prosecutor came out with a smile on her face. She says that after

I left Bonga addressed the court and pleaded guilty to all charges that involve me. I did not feel better because he is guilty so I was not about to thank him. Sindi came to me and we exchanged numbers. She said she's been following Bonga's case since it started. I promised her we'd catch up and she understood why I could not speak. Mrs E kept on going on about Liyema but I'd block out the sound of her voice whenever she did, I don't want to talk about him nor to him. They told us it's okay for me to leave. I left with Mrs B since she brought

me because Liyema was too busy with who knows what. I felt crushed to the core. I arrived at Mrs B's house and she made me a nice cup of tea. She did not say anything just at with me. We sat like that until I fell asleep. I got woken up by my phone. I thought it was Liyema but it was Ma Eunice telling me that she is alone with the boys and asking when we will pick them up. Liyema has the car so it only makes sense that he would pick the boys up. I tried calling him again but nothing. I called his mother and asked if he is okay because she

seemed to know something I don't. She started by saying that he is angry at his father because of Zingisa. When I heard Zingisa's name I dropped the phone in her ear. I was not about to listen to how angry Liyema was about Zingisa again. I'm tired of hearing that name. So he is okay, he just could not come support me in court because he is angry at his father about Zingisa? To hell with that. I borrowed Mrs B's car and went to pick up my boys. They looked so relief to see me. I'm sure they know by now that if other kids gets picked up one of us are on

our way to get them but not today because of Zingisa? I put them all in the back without car seats. I tried to secure them with the seatbelts of the car but it was not secure enough for them. It was strange for them too. I drove back to Mrs B's place and asked her to drive us home. She had no problem helping. She dropped us off and the house was empty. No Liyema. I called his work, no Liyema. I gave my babies things to keep them busy while I made food for us. His granny never came because she fell ill. She promised to visit

soon though. I fed my children and went to bath them. It has been easy to do it alone since I've basically been doing it alone for a while. We played for a while before they slept. I wanted to sleep at Mrs B's so that one can come home to an empty house. But the boys would be restless all night. They like their own room. I realized when I was at Liyema's home in Mtata. I was not hungry because after the way that lawyer humiliated me, I can't stomach anything but tea. I was made to feel like a whore and that I deserved the abuse. I've

never broke down in front of strangers like that. I went to shower and put my gown on. I went to take my bag so I'd get some school work done. I could not. I thought about the trauma in court again and cried but I pulled myself together again. I always do. Liyema came in just when I was about to go upstairs to sleep.

Liyema: "Baby, I'm sorry for not getting the boys, I got so caught up in this Tata nonsense. Ma Eunice said you got them. Whose car did you use?" I felt like slapping him but that would make

me no better than Bonga. I looked at him. "Why are your eyes swollen. Were you crying?", he looked at me. I walked up the stairs but he followed me and held my arm.

Lakhiwe: "Thanks for being a man who can't keep promises, Liyema. Court was great, thanks," I said sarcastically. Took my arm out of his grip and went to my bedroom. I could hear him say "shit" multiple times while following behind me.

Liyema: "Lala, I'm sorry. My mind got so filled with stuff after Ta got arrested. I found out that

he was having an affair with Zingisa while married to me,"

Lakhiwe: "I don't care!" I shouted at him for the first time since we'd been married. "It's Zingisa this, Zingisa that. Go get her from the morgue and remarry her then, Liyema," I said while crying. He got closer. "Don't touch me," I shouted again. Luckily the door was closed so the noise was blocked for the kids, well I hope.

Liyema: "I'm sorry," he said softly.

Lakhiwe: "I've done nothing but support you, Liyema while you

sort things out at your work. I've had to bite my tongue when I felt like complaining about things that bothered me because I did not want to add to your life stresses. I've been breaking my back taking on more responsibilities when it comes to taking care of the boys which is not easy at all. I've been doing the most and I did not mind because to me supporting my husband is important. All I asked in return was for you to...to...t...t..to be in court so I could have a "safe place" while there. You were suppose to be my

safe place as you promised you would but you were not there.

That was all I asked, for you to be there," I looked at him while crying.

Liyema: "I'm sorry,"

Lakhiwe: "It's not enough. I can't believe how selfish you've acted today and to leave our children at daycare knowing I did not have a car? If I hear you say Zingisa's name one more time, I'll scream. I'm not going to compete with the ghost of a dead woman. Please go,"

Liyema: "Lala, I'm sorry. It slipped my mind. I can't believe it

slipped my damn mind, shit. I'm sorry. There is no excuse.."

Lakhiwe: "Get out of the room please. I had a long day. I had such a long...day an...and I can't right now. I've been taking on so much trying to support you and your mother. I can't...I'm tired. Please just sleep in the guestroom because I can't be next to you right now, please. You spent the entire day who knows where crying about things that involve your ex wife and forgot that I, your current wife needed you,"

Liyema: "And being here right now listening to you makes me realize

how being caught up in what happened was not worth it ,”

Lakhiwe: “I want to sleep. Please go,” I looked at him.

Liyema: “Lakhiwe please,” he pleaded.

Lakhiwe: “Do you know what I found out today, Liyema? You know what, just leave me alone.

Go so I can deal with what happened,” I said. He pleaded and even went on his knees but I could not.

He looked at me and then he walked out slowly. I closed and locked the door after he left. I

wanted to tell him that Bonga had sex with me without my consent. I thought that because I did not say no while he was doing it, it was right. I thought that me not saying no was me giving him consent. Bonga knew I did not want to sleep with him but I was his girlfriend so I fooled myself into thinking he had the right. I wanted to tell him that while he was out crying his eyes out for his ex, I found out that sex that a woman does not want even if she does not say "no" out loud, was considered rape. He was not there to hear that

because he was somewhere crying because of his ex wife. I never thought about having sex with Bonga those last times as rape. I knew I did not want it and that I felt dirty afterward but I never saw it as rape. To me rape was when a man forces a woman to have sex after she said "NO!" clearly and out loud. I never said no but I did not say yes either. The lines got blurred because I did not say no nor did I say yes. I went to our bed and I cried even more. I hear why he is hurt. His father slept with his ex wife while they were married.

But he could have come to court, just so I'd see his face and then we would have dealt with it together but he chose to do things in a way that made me feel like Zingisa meant more to him than he let on. He made me feel insecure and all that because of a dead ex. I'm sorry his dad did that to him but I still don't see it as an enough of an excuse to not come out and support me. I called him and his phone was on. So he saw my calls but chose to switch his phone off so I could not him. Seeing my name on his screen should have triggered his

memory because I don't just call him during work hours for nothing. I'm disappointed and sad. I was hoping to feel those soft kisses he likes so much while we laid in our bed after having a difficult day. Could the support in this marriage be one sided when it comes to certain things? I got under the covers after my eyes were cried out. They were burning and sore from crying. I'm sure Liyema not being in court gave Bonga great satisfaction too. I have never needed my husband more than I needed him today and he failed me. Him breaking his

promise hurt more than having to be ripped apart by Bonga's lawyer, so much more. Those people are nothing to me but he is my everything and my everything let me down the one time I asked for his support. We were suppose to still be in a happy marriage bubble but I think that bubble burst today.

FORTY EIGHT

LIYEMA

I stood on the other side of the locked door knowing that my wife

is inside crying because of me. I don't deserve her. I will not even try to justify my actions. I was wrong and deserve anything she chooses to throw at me but one thing I can't afford is losing her. I'd be lost without her I know that for a fact. I sat with my back against the door with my own tears flowing down not because of what I heard about my father but because I felt like I failed my wife. I feel like I've failed at being the man she deserves. I wanted to cuddle her so much. I miss her. I'm sorry for being selfish. I stood and went to

the boys room. I found them all sleeping peacefully. I'm sure it was not easy for Lakhiwe to act okay in front of them. I can't remember the last time I spent real time with all five of them. I'm sure if they had to choose whose care they want to be in, they would say mommy. How could I forget to pick up my children? How could I forget the one day my wife asked me to be there for her? I promised her nothing would stand in the way of me being in court but I let the one person I despised who is not even alive stop me. I kissed each boy

on the cheek before leaving them to rest. I went to test our bedroom door again but it was still locked. I went downstairs to get some water when I heard a knock on the door. It was late so I did not expect anyone. When I opened the door I felt a hard slap on my face before even looking at the person. I turned my face and saw Mma looking angry. She pushed me aside and let herself in. Mma: "If I could put you over my lap and give you a decent beating, I would. Where the hell were you when your wife needed you, Liyema?," she pointed at me.

Liyema: "No where. I drove around just to clear my head. I don't....," she slapped me again before I could say anything further. "Mma, stop it. You don't get to come into my house and slap me like some little boy who needs to be disciplined," I shouted softly. Mma: "You acted like one earlier on, so don't blame me for treating you accordingly. You don't understand how much she needed you there, do you?," she said in a shaky voice. Liyema: "I realize it, Mma. Trust me, I feel like shit for not going," Mma: "I watched that poor girl hold your hand

while you had trouble. While she held your hand with one hand, she held mine in her other hand while your children clung to her and while her school work was lying heavy on her back. Picture that, Liyema and maybe then will you realize how much Lakhiwe had on her shoulders. She carried us alone but when she needed the one person she shares life with to carry her, you let her fall on the hard, cold concrete floor head first leaving her bleeding. I held her but she could not balance because her strongest pillar was not there for her to lean on, that's how she

landed on the floor bleeding. I want you to make a mental picture of that because that's how much you hurt her, just not physically but all the other ways," she pointed at me while crying. The picture of my wife bleeding on a concrete floor because I was not there to support her played in my mind and I hated myself for it. It might not be her head that's bleeding but I know her heart and soul are. Liyema: "I'm sorry, Mma," I cried too. Mma: "I'm not the one you should be saying that to. She learned today that she was a victim of rape

too," I looked at her. My heart was beating at a rate that was not normal. Rape? "That thing used to have sex with her without checking if she was okay with it. She thought nothing was wrong because how can a boyfriend rape his girlfriend, right? Well it happens and it happened to your wife. It might not have been the violent rape where she kicked and screamed but he slept with her when she gave no consent. She did not see it as rape because she did not say no but the court made her realize that a yes was never given

either. I don't know how you will fix this, Liyema. I'm hurt on her behalf. I can not imagine how she must be feeling," I broke down and sank to the floor. I was not there and it will forever leave a mark on our marriage. Liyema: "I won't blame her for leaving me. She deserves more," I said between sobs. Mma: "After what you did, I agree. If you lose her, you'll never find another. Let me tell you now, women like Lakhiwe don't fall from trees. We put up with the crap our husbands feed us but good women have limits too. Your father pushed me over

the edge so I'm done. I just hope Lakhawe does not feel the same. Gone are the days women suffered just to flaunt a damn ring. I hate rubbing this in your face but no one else will be as honest as I am with you,"

Liyema: "How do I fix this, Mma?"

Mma: "I don't know, Ndoda. All I can say is give her space and let her be the one to come to you when ready. In the meanwhile remind her why you're worth her staying. I can't believe you let your father and Zingisa get to you like this," Liyema: "I know, I know. I was stupid," Mma: "Also

once forgiven or if forgiven, find balance between home life and work. When you got a stable home life, you focused on that and lost money because you neglected business. Now you've buried your head in work and neglect home. Balance, Liyema. In the meantime take your responsibilities you had back from Lakhiwe. She's tired. Don't worry about your father. His trusted friend Dudumashe is handling things. Focus on your wife and kids. Your father is not worth my tears nor yours and your brother's. Let me go. I'm staying

at Makazi's should you want to bring the boys over. I miss them and Makazi won't mind that we look after them for a weekend. I love you," Liyema: "Thanks, Mma. How are you holding up?," Mma: "Focus here, Liyema. I'll be with my family getting love and support. You be here, be present here," she ordered. "I won't lose ano..." she stopped herself from talking. Liyema: "Another daughter because of me. I don't want you to either " Mma: "I'm sorry for saying that. I'm just emotional. Goodnight. Makazi is waiting outside for me," She

kissed my cheek and left. I expected her to fall apart after what she heard today but she was good. She told me Ta was still in jail. I didn't care. What he did hurt me but I don't know why I was surprised. He and Zingisa were the most selfish people I know. And now because I let them get to me, I was selfish towards my wife. Rape? My wife realized that and I was no where to be seen. I threw myself on the couch and just thought of ways to fix things. I ate an apple and drank my pills. I went to the couch again and must have dozed

off. I woke up with a sore back because of the damn couch. I went to our door again but it was still locked. I went to the boys room and they woke up slowly but surely. They then created chaos after that. They all started to cry and went to our bedroom door. If only they knew that I wanted her to open too. I finally managed to calm them down. I had forgotten what a handful they are. I got them ready to school and fed them. They messed the clothes they had on and I had to change them all. I had to pack their bags. I can't believe that

I've been so selfish to let Lakiwe do this alone. It's a mission to get them ready together so for one person it's nearly impossible. After shouting at them several times, them crying, them throwing tantrums and me losing my cool. I finally got them in the car and off to daycare. I still had yesterday's clothes on and I had not brushed my teeth nor washed my face. They don't cry when being dropped off so that's a relief. I drove back home, ate a slice of dry bread just to have something in my system. Lakiwe came down

wearing a playful short jumpsuit. She had not worn short stuff since we've been married. I don't mind it but I know those boys will give her trouble by asking her out. She took a banana, her bag and walked to the door. Liyema: "Lala, please let's talk," I ran to her and she just looked up at me. Lakhiwe: "I'm late, the shuttle will leave without me," she said while trying to pass but I didn't let her. We went to bed while angry at each other. That has never happened. Liyema: "I'll take you. I've already taken the boys to daycare," Lakhiwe: "Should I

write you a thank you card?" she asked sarcastically. I deserved that. Liyema: "No, baby. I just want us to talk please," Lakiwe: "Go reincarnate your other wife. She is more important, isn't she?" she looked at me. Liyema: "Mma told me that happened in court yesterday," Lakiwe: "I don't want to talk about it," she pushed me aside but I held her. Liyema: "Lala, please. I beg you to just listen," she stood with her back towards me. "I'm sorry I was not there. I won't even try to justify myself, I was wrong. Please tell me how to fix it,"

Lakhiwe: "Go back in time to before the court time started. Pick me up from home like you promised and go with me to court," I felt defeated. Liyema: "Baby, you know I can't,"

Lakhiwe: "Then you can't fix it," she let herself out of my grip and ran out. I know Mma said I should give her space but I can't. I miss her and I want us to talk about yesterday. I want her to let me in again. I want to know how she is really feeling and what's on her mind. I want to talk about...about the rape. Damn that coward for putting my wife

through such shit. I watched as she walked out of the yard and ran up the road to catch a taxi or a shuttle in time. I went inside hating myself. I took a shower, had some breakfast, got dressed and went to work. I couldn't focus so I asked the team if I can leave. They said they will keep things running and call if they needed me. Mma was right, I needed to learn to balance. I called Dudumashe and asked him to organize for me to see Tata. He got denied bail because he is a flight risk since he can afford to skip the country. He'll be

transferred to prison to await his trial. I found him looking defeated but he kept a straight face. Ta: "You need to get me out of here. I've made a list of people who might be beh...", Liyema: "After everything that surfaced, you can only order me to get you out of here? No apology or at least show you're remorseful?" I shouted. Ta: "For something that is over and done with? It happened years ago, Liyema. So you're gonna let your dead ex wife get between us?" I held him by the collar and I could see he was not expecting it. Liyema: "What you did ruined

things with my wife, my wife not that thing you chose for me. Because of you my marriage is in trouble and I swear if my wife leaves me, you'll pay," Ta: "Man up and stop blaming me for your problems. If you're having problems with your wife is because you are weak as a husband. You proved that by your first one cheating on you and who knows what this one has done. Be a man, be a husband and not this weak boy I see. Maybe then will you pass at being a damn husband," I wanted to punch him but I grew up believing hitting

your elders brings bad luck. I will not let bad luck follow me because of him. Liyema: "You're the weak one. You go around acting like you're the shit but you're not. You're now in jail facing maximum sentence yet you tell me I'm weak. At least I'm man enough to know that a woman is to be respected. At least I'm man enough to have never laid a hand on a woman, let alone kill one. You killed a defenceless woman and if that makes you strong as a man, I'd rather be weak. Look at you. All over the papers. You're pathetic. You lost a diamond in

Mma while chasing Zingisa, she was not even a damn stone, she was dust. I can't believe that I was not with my wife because of worthless shits like you two. I hope you rot in hell," I said to him. "Go test yourself while at it," I left him standing there looking shocked. I drove to Lala's campus and waited for her. I'm not sure if she'll pass by where I'm standing but I'm hoping she will. I sat in the car for over an hour but no sign of her. I went out the car to lean against it so she'd see me. A group of ladies came looking at me like I'm a

snack. I hated it. One of them was even brave enough to come to me. Her breasts were almost hanging out of her top. She greeted me and I was polite and greeted back. She stood so close to me I could hear her breath. I made sure to create a gap between us. I even asked her to leave because I'm waiting for my wife but she was not backing down. I felt so uncomfortable and was about to get back in my car when I saw Lakiwe looking at me. She went the other direction. I ran after her but she disappeared into the passages. I

decided to not embarrass her more at school and left. Hours went by and I went to get the boys. I cooked dinner while they watched TV and played. Lala walked in and they all ran to her, they have not seen her all day. She hugged them and gave them each a kiss. How I wish to also get her hug and kiss. She gave me a death stare before sitting on the mat in the lounge playing with the boys. I decided to give her space. After I finished cooking, we fed the boys in silence. She wanted to bath them but I said I'd do it. I did so and put

them in sleepwear. They felt like being with mommy more before sleeping. They all just sat with her, each holding some part of her. I wish I could too. They fell asleep while in her arms. I took them each up to bed and found her collecting their toys. I helped her but she stopped and was about to leave. I pleaded with her not to and she sat on the couch with arms crossed. Liyema: "I'm sorry for going to campus. That girl I pro...", Lakhiwe: "She's like that. She throws herself at any man with a car so you're not special," she said

sarcastically. Liyema: "I'm glad because I only want to be special for you and to you. Lala, I was not in court and no amount of wishing will change that. All I can do is ask how you are feeling now," Lakhiwe: "I'm angry. I'm angry at you and I don't think I'll stop anytime soon," Liyema: "which is understandable. Mma told me about...about..." Lakhiwe: "I'm actually not as hurt about that. I've spoken about that with the therapist but she never gave what happened the rape label. I guess she was shielding me from feeling like a victim. Yes, I now

see it differently but I'll be okay. It happened and I'll get over it. I've always gotten over things. What's one more to the list, right?" she looked at me. Liyema: "Baby don't say it like I'm not here to stand by you, please," I cried. Lakhiwe: "Where were you yesterday when we needed you most?" she cried too. Liyema: "Being a selfish jerk and making my wife feel like she's alone in this. I was not there when you needed me most and I'm sorry. I hate...I hate myself so much for it," I said while wiping my tears off. She just looked at me while

crying. Lakhiwe: "I needed you, Liyema," she said quietly. "I searched for you. Even had you been the only person there to support me it would have been enough. Mrs E and Mrs B were there but without you the person I'm supposed to face anything with not being there, it was as if I was alone with Bonga again feeling like a helpless thing that he could do whatever with. I wanted to look at your face like you said I should when testifying but I searched for your face and you were not there. You didn't even realize you forgot something

important. Even had you been late I'd have appreciate it. I needed you," she cried more. I cried until I felt nauseous. We both just cried. I wanted to hold her but I was not sure she'd allow me but she was the one to come to me and I grabbed her into my arms so quickly before she could change her mind. I don't deserve this woman, not by a long shot. I held onto her so tightly and she had her arms wrapped tightly around my rib area. It was as if she'd crush them. Liyema: "I'm sorry I let what happened make me neglect you. I promise I'll never

put anyone or anything before you and the boys again. I was just shocked, baby and neither of those people deserved my time," she let go of me. Lakhiwe: "It doesn't mean I've forgiven you. You'll still sleep in the guestroom until I can sleep next to you again. You hurt me, Liyema. All the years of being beaten by Bonga, does not compare to how this hurt me because I love you. Will I have to hear about this woman even in death? I've given you space to process her death too. I'm having issues of my own. My grades are dropping. I got

48% in an important test because I couldn't study for it due to what has been going on," Liyema: "Why did you not tell me? We'd have found a way to let you have time to study," Lakiwe: "That's my flaw, I put everyone else first and forget about myself. I for once wish people could do the same for me. I give out kindness to everyone person I care about but I forget I'm a person too, that I need and deserve my own kindness," Liyema: "You deserve all the good things, you're clearly just surrounded by selfless people, myself included. I

promise it'll never happen again, never," Lakhiwe: "We'll see, Liyema. I saw your father on the cover of a newspaper. Did he do it?," Liyema: "All the evidence point to him and he had a motive," Lakhiwe: "How's Mma?" Liyema: "She is okay. Don't worry about her. Focus on yourself," Lakhiwe: "My husband is not facing jail time for murder. She can't be fine," I called Mma and let Lala speak to her herself. It sounded like Mma's playing music in the background but she can't be out having fun with her hubby in jail. Lala promised to go see

Mma tomorrow but Mma said she can't come because me and Lala will be going to Durban for the weekend while she and Makazi watch the boys. All expenses paid. We hung up and Lala did not seem too keen. Liyema: "Do you want to go?" Lakiwe: "With things being the way they are between us? I don't know, Liyema. I don't think it's a good idea," Liyema: "It'll be the first time we get to spend time together, Lala. I'll sleep on the floor. Maybe time away from this, all of it work, varsity, extended family and even the boys is what we need. We've been

distracted way too much,"

Lakhiwe: "I'll think about it. Do you need an extra blanket?"

Liyema: "I miss you. I miss falling asleep with you in my arms,"

Lakhiwe: "I'll take that as a no. Goodnight. I'll give you my answer tomorrow regarding the trip," she walked away Liyema: "I love you, Lala and I'll never drop the ball in that way again. I'm sorry I couldn't make you feel safe," she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "I'm sorry you couldn't too. Goodnight," she said before going up the stairs. I'm hoping that she'll agree to go tomorrow.

Another night without her next to me and it's torture. At least she spoke to me which is progress. I made sure the doors are locked and switched the lights off. I went to the cold guestroom missing my own bed so much. I went down on my knees and said a prayer. I needed God's help to fix things with my wife. Makhulu called saying she is on her way with the uncles on Tuesday next week. The called Mma to tell her to accommodate her in laws. I don't want people around and have Lala running around looking after them and forget about

herself and her books. I'll take on extra load now that things at work are better. My Lala needs to focus on varsity. The next time Mma paints a mental picture of her falling. The want to be there to catch her, I'll will be there. I'll never make her feel alone again. I want to be kind to my wife and kids never want her to neglect herself again. If she falls apart, we all do. I have a feeling that this rape thing hurt her more than she lets on but I'll wait until she opens up to me herself. I won't make her go through it alone. I was not there even she

found out but if it's caused any kind of trauma, I'll be there and hold her hand while she gets through it. I love her too much to lose her. Maybe time alone will do us good. It doesn't even have to be a passion filled getaway. I just want to hold her and listen when she talks. I'm praying she agrees to go.

FORTY NINE

Ntombi

I decided against going on the Durban trip with Liyema. Not

because I did not want to but I felt it would make things worse rather than better because I was not ready to go away alone with him. I've been observing my husband for the past few weeks and remembered one of the reasons why I married him. When Liyema says he is sorry, he does not just say it in words but in actions too. I've watched him take back his home responsibilities that have truly been lying heavy on me. He even told his mother to accommodate the Elephant uncles so I would not have to run around like

headless chicken to please demanding in laws. Mma did not go home to her house. The uncles came with their wives and she gave them access to the house. Makhulu got sicker when she heard about her son's arrest and his affair and could once again not come. I'm not sure how I feel about Mr Elephant's arrest. I imagine a man like him to clean up his mess well when committing a crime. I know the evidence points to him but this murder looks "too messy" for a man like him or I'm just letting my imagination get the better of me. I have decided

to just get back to normal before I allow family problems to weigh me down again. I have been going to the in laws house, I am a makoti after all. Liyema's uncles seem to understand why Mma would not want to be home when Tata is around. They have gone back home yesterday because there is nothing they can do to free their brother.

After a week of watching my dear husband I decided to go on the trip with him. Fortunately Mma said her offer for the trip still stands should we change our minds. To say Liyema was excited

when I told him would be an understatement. The boys will be with their two grannies for the weekend. I don't like it when both Liyema and I are away from them but they will be in safe hands, spoiling hands but safe. We had to say goodbye to them when we dropped them off at daycare. Mma will be the one to fetch them because should they see us leave, we will never make it to the airport in time. I packed their clothes and ours while Liyema was at work. He will be home soon to pick me up and we will go to his aunt's to leave our

car since it is the only one that takes four car seats. I'm feeling good about this trip. Liyema arrived when I finished about everything but I had this feeling that I'm forgetting something. Liyema picked me up and put me in the car and our bags. He went to put the alarm on and lock the doors. My poor hubby is so excited he can't contain himself and I must admit it melts my heart. We drove to his aunt's in silence but it was not awkward.

Liyema: "So the pitch to the potential client went very well today. I'm feeling confident about

this one, baby," he said with a smile.

Lakhiwe: "You have worked hard to make it happen, baby. I'm feeling confident about it too,"

Liyema: "It's the first time you called me "baby" since I've been in the dogbox. It feels good to hear it again," we both smiled.

Lakhiwe: "I've calmed down somewhat. Do you think it's a good idea to leave Mma with the kids when she is already going through so much?"

Liyema: "She is actually handling it better than I expected. I

guess Ta made her stop caring with the affair,"

Lakhiwe: "Yeah which is understandable. Your father being well known and all over the papers is not really helping much. Do you think they will grant him bail in his next bail application?"

Liyema: "I don't know. Baby, please let us not talk about this heavy topic. It is one of the reasons why you and I are here today and I only want to think about it when we are back. I want to be focused on you and having a great time together this weekend,"

I was not about to say anything about that because he is right. We spoke about everything on our way to his aunt's place. He even managed to make me smile a few times. I was tired of not speaking to him anyway. Varsity is the same. I wish Sindi was at UCT with me. We arrived at his aunt's house and the first thing we saw was a colourful jumping castle. Liyema and I both put our hands on our head. They will spoil the boys and we will have to deal with the consequences. We got out the car and Mma came running to hug us. She is glowing.

I would look like a hobbo should Liyema go to jail for murder. I would not cope but not Zola Elephant.

Liyema: "Mma, please take the jumping castle down. Come Monday they will cry for it and I will not go hire one for nonsense," he said in a stern voice.

Mrs E: "This will keep them busy so they won't think about you two. I have the best weekend planned. We will also go to that dinosaurs thing. I have been neglecting my babies for far too long,"

Liyema: "Lala, please talk to your mother while I put their bags inside," he went to the car to take the boys bags out and ours since the car will stay.

Mrs E: "Don't even, Lakhiwe. I know you guys have had to scale down so that means my babies have not been spoiled in a long while," she said and she actually had a point.

Lakhiwe: "I hear you, Mma. We will deal with it when we get back. If they give us trouble and throwing tantrums because they want all you did for them, we bring them back," she laughed.

Mrs E: "I would love to have life in the house again, so please by all means do bring them back. I'm so glad you decided to go away, my baby. I have a feeling this will be good for you both," she said and we both looked at Liyema who kept shaking his head whenever he passed the jumping castle.

Lakhiwe: "How are you? You did not even pop in when the uncles came to town,"

Mrs E: "They came to their brother, not to me. I do not want to be in that house, Khiwe. It is so big. I just cannot, my baby. I hope you did not tell Liyema that

I tested a long time ago," she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "Did you know he was sleeping with Zingisa since you wanted to test that same day?"

Mrs E: "Sexual decease was not just carried by Zingisa, my baby. I found out my hubby cheated and like any sensible human, I tested," she said while looking at me. She had a point. "I thought it was his secretary, not Zingisa,"

Lakhiwe: "But you saw the texts on the phone. How could you not know it was her because you

mentioned this woman was threatening him,"

Mrs E: "It was common threats like "you do not do as I say, I tell it all" I did not read all the other texts that would have told me it was Zingi because I was afraid of being caught with the phone. I confronted him for the affair I thought he had with his secretary. Had I found out it was Zingisa that day, he would not have had balls today because I would have cut them off. He is lucky I only found out when he was behind bars and in police protection,"

Lakhiwe: "Oh okay," she looked at me.

Mrs E: "So you do not believe me?"

Lakhiwe: "I do, Mma and relax I have not told Liyema that you tested. So were your results really negative?"

Mrs E: "Yes, now Detective Elephant go inside to greet Makazi before your taxi arrives,"

Lakhiwe: "I'm standing in front of you and I'm wearing jeans and without a doek"

Mrs E: "Nonsense, go in there. Had you arrived with a granny skirt while on your way to a

getaway with your man I would have had a big problem. Here is a towel if you are not comfortable with Makazi seeing you in jeans, wrap it around your waist," she took the towel from her shoulders and gave it to me.

I found Liyema talking to his aunt about them scaling down on what they will do for the boys. Makazi looked as unbothered as her sister. They look so much alike. They even have similar soft voices. Makazi adores me. I'm blessed with great in laws I must say. Makazi told me to take the ugly towel off so she would

see what I'm wearing to make Liyema drool. These women are so easygoing. She even whistled when I twirled? I laughed so much because I'm wearing a high waist jean and a crop top, no big deal. Our taxi finally arrived and we made our way to the airport. I have never been to Durban but I have read great things about it. We arrived after a few hours and just the air felt different. Liyema has been everywhere in South Africa and to a few countries overseas too so he knew KZN well. We hired a car and made our way to the hotel. He did not

even need directions because he knew it well. The hotel was beautiful and overlooks the ocean. I opened the door to the balcony and stepped outside to take in the fresh air. Liyema held my waist area. I know he wants to hug me from behind but he is still unsure if it is safe. I missed him so I took his hands and wrapped his arms around me. He kissed my neck. I turned my head to look at him and we shared a long kiss. I could feel his manhood press against my back. We have not been intimate since the court case. He broke the kiss and held

me closer to him. We both just looked at the blue sea. I think he is taking things slow since I discovered what I did in court. I was not lying to him when I said I'm not hurt by it. I turned to face him.

Lakhiwe: "I hated everything about this week, baby. I hated going to bed alone especially," he kissed me.

Liyena: "So are we sharing the bed tonight?" I nodded. "I actually did not hate all of this week. I've learned to appreciate you more after what I did so this week has come with lessons too. I

also hated not falling asleep next to you. Thank you for this, for agreeing to come here and I'm glad you did it at your own time and not when Mma and I wanted it," he kissed my forehead.

Lakhiwe: "Ndlovu," I said softly.

Liyema: "Lala," he looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "I forgive you, sthandwa sam,"

Liyema: "Thank you, baby. I love you,"

Lakhiwe: "I love you too,"

We kissed and I think we have both missed each other a lot. He picked me up and walked inside. I

have really forgiven him. What I have learned about marriage so far, is the importance of forgiveness. I'm not in this to divorce so there are things we both will have to forgive for the rest of our lives. He did not mean to hurt me. I know had this news with his father not come at the exact same time as my court date, he would have been there. We almost tore our clothes off, that is how much we craved one another. I missed the feel of his skin on mine so much. He was gentle. His caresses and kisses were soft and filled with love. He

took a condom and put it on. He then kissed me while he was between my legs. The moment was perfect until the air was filled with the smell of beer, bad breath and tobacco. Liyema kissed my neck but the smell of Bonga would not go away. I tensed up and he noticed and stopped. He looked at me and tears just came out. I love how attentive my husband is. Here he was in a heated moment of promising sex after days of not doing it yet he could tell by my body language that the mood has changed. He got off me and I turned on my

side to face the other way. I curled up and just cried. He took the sheet and covered me before holding me. I cried silently just trying to figure out what just happened. Liyema does not smoke, he does not drink and the only time he has bad breath is when he wakes up in the morning yet that was what he smelled like a few minutes ago. I turned to face him and he made some space between us. I did not want space between us so I closes the gap by getting closer to him. I told him why I had to ruin a perfect moment and apologized.

Liyema: "Don't apologize. I'm sorry for rushing things, baby,"

Lakhiwe: "Thank you for smelling nice, baby" he laughed softly.

Liyema: "Wanna go out and explore Durban?"

Lakhiwe: "For now I just want to be in your arms. That okay?," I looked at him.

Liyema: "Is that a trick question?"

My poor hubby had to go to the bathroom first and I'm guessing to get his mind off anything sexual so his manhood would go back soft. I felt so bad. He came

back and held me as I asked him too. I missed him. I hope that this Bonga thing won't affect our sexual life. Both of us eventually fell asleep. When we woke up the sun had started to set already. We must really have been tired. We decided to go on a date. We had a shower together and it was something I missed as well. We called the boys and neither wanted to talk on the phone because they were having too much fun. We then decided tomorrow is another day. I made a lot of effort for this date, even put on make up. Liyema looked his

not usual self. He said he knew exactly where he wants to take me. We got into the car and drove off. He was singing for me all the way, so much so that he got lost. We lowered the music to see better. I don't know why we do that.

Lakhiwe: "I thought you knew the way, baby" we both laughed.

Liyema: "How do you expect your man to concentrate when you are looking so hot? I have been looking at those legs instead of the road," I laughed.

We drove pass a rather dodgy street filled with young girls in rather small clothing thar covered only what needed to be covered to not be naked. They soon approached the car and a one was by my window.

Lady: "Hey, looking for someone extra to have a good time with tonight. Three is company after all," she said in a flirty voice.

Liyema rolled the window up before I could say no thank you and sped off.

Liyema: "Why did you look like you wanted to say something to her?"

Lakhiwe: "I wanted to say no thanks to her offer," he looked at me briefly and back on the road again.

Liyema: "She was not offering you food, Lala she was offering herself to us for a damn threesome,"

Lakhiwe: "I know that, Mr Elephant but I thought it would be polite to say no,"

Liyema: "Your humbleness sometimes works on my nerves. I don't see how you can even talk to such people. They are disgusting,"

Lakhiwr: "And you and I are perfect, baby?" I looked at him.

Liyema: "No, but I don't know why they sell themselves to sleazy men instead of going to school and making something of their lives,"

Lakhiwe: "Well excuse us for not having been spoonfed by rich parents, Mr raised with a silver spoon in the mouth," he exhaled loudly.

Liyema: "I'm not doing this with you, Lala not because of some prostitutes. I agree I had it

easy but you did not, yet here you are studying to get a better life,"

Lakhiwe: "Baby, do you realize that Bonga threatened many times to pimp me out? What if one or two of those girls have a Bonga who is pimping them to different men?," he kept quiet. "I understand that you grew up with life being black and white but some of us had grey areas in our lives," I said in a shaky voice.

Liyema: "I'm sorry. I did not mean to upset you, baby? You are right, I was shielded from a lot of things. I'm sorry for judging a situation I do not understand,"

Lakhiwe: "Not so long ago you told me not to hitchhike because human trafficking is real. How sure are we those are not victims of such?"

Liyema: "You are right. I was not thinking of it like that. I guess I still have to open my eyes to a lot of things before I condemn. I do not even have a right to condemn people when I'm also rotten with sin. Thank you for opening my eyes. I just hate seeing such beautiful ladies doing such,"

Lakhiwe: "I understand and I hate it too but we got to understand that no woman will

choose to sell herself, not like that. They must be forced by circumstances. They really are beautiful. One actually looked a bit like your sister," he looked at me.

Liyema: " No, baby please, I hear you about them not having a choice but no, now you are taking it too far. Honestly its better a dead sister than one prostituting herself. Bite my head off but it is just how I feel,"

Lakhiwe: "I respect your feelings. Just because we are married, it does not mean we will agree on

everything. Lets talk about something else," he smiled.

Liyema: "Thank you," I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "So I have a new favorite color now," he laughed softly.

Liyema: "One week in the dogbox and I already have a new you?"

Okay update your hubby then so he won't come across as a fool when asked,"

Lakhiwe: "I will give hubby subtle hints. it'll be more fun that way," we both laughed.

Liyema: "Okay so when does the fun start," he parked the car and looked at me with a smile.

Lakhiwe: "Maybe it has started already," I winked at him. He checked me from head to toe,"

Liyema: "Okay I see some red here and there? What colour is your underwear?" he asked in a low sexy voice which made the area between my legs just feel warmer.

Lakhiwe: "I'm not wearing any," his jaw dropped. "Pick up your bottom lip, Mr Elephant. You are about to drool all over the car

seat," I laughed softly and stepped out of the car.

He came out too and held my hand while laughing. He grabbed my bum subtly to feel if I was wearing a panty. He squeezed my ass when he realized I was not lying. My body ached for him so much. We went in to have a lovely dinner. We laughed and danced.

This date was truly better than all we have had. We then went to a karaoke bar because the night was still young. I have never went to a bar with Liyema and I must say we had a lot of fun.

Coming here reminded us that we

might be married and parents of four but we are still very young. I was shocked when he stood to put his name on the lineup. They called out his name and he smiled, kissed me and went to the front.

Liyema: "Hi, everyone. I'm Liyema and I would like to sing my special lady a something. She is sitting right over there", he pointed at me and the light focused on me.

People started to clap and whistle. I blushed until my cheeks were on fire. "I'll be singing Ungowami by Semito. Lala, I love you,"

There I sat in the crowd looking at my handsome man sing for me, just for me, no one else. Ungowami is one of my favourites and I love Semito but he was no match for my hubby tonight. I'm sure even had Liyema sang off key I would have said the same thing. He walked closer to me and when he sang "Wena Ungowami" over and over again I melted. I cried but tears of joy. If this man is still trying to melt my heart for what happened than he has won me over. When he finished he kissed me and offered me a tissue from my own bag. The crowd wanted

him to sing the track again and he actually did. We had such a great night. We drove back to the hotel and I wanted him to make love to me so badly but I was afraid I would let him down again. We kissed but innocently. He kept things safe and I appreciated it but it was not what I wanted. The kiss became passionate and rushed when I put my hands up his shirt and unbuttoned it.

Liyema: "Baby, don't force yourself to do this. Not every couple get away needs to have hot sex in it," he held my face in his hands while looking at me. "I love you. I want

you so badly, so badly but not when you feel like you are obligated to just because we are married and on vacation," I kissed him.

Lakhiwe: "Nothing ever felt forced with you, baby, nothing" I smiled. "

He kissed me but once again he was safe. I asked that we make love under the stars. I don't know why I always wanted that. He carried me out to the balcony.

The air was cool and when our naked upper bodies touched we both got goosebumps. He gently laid me on the patio couch that

was on the balcony. We had privacy from our neighbors but the moon and stars could see everything. He took a condom from his pants that laid on the floor while still keeping the process innocent. I love him so much. He loved, kissed, caressed my body and I showed him the same amount of love and craving. He put the condom on and asked me one more time if I'm sure. I smiled and nodded. He kissed me and I took in the delicious scent of his Cologne. I let my smell senses get lost in his scent and that of the ocean and I enjoyed

each and every second of being one with him. We sat out in the open night afterwards just holding each other.

Liyema: "You okay?" I looked up to face him.

Lakhiwe: "I never want something to happen that will cause such a rift between us, Ndlovu,"

Liyema: "Never again, baby. Are you sure you are okay?"

Lakhiwe: "Are you asking about what happened earlier?" He nodded. "I just had a terrible

flashback, baby. I will speak to Mrs B,"

Liyema: "But you will speak to me too, right?" I smiled.

Lakhiwe: "Of course you are my best friend after all,"

Liyema: "Still no luck making friends on campus," I shook my head. "Baby, maybe you have not connected with any because non would make good friends to you. I know having friends is a big deal to you, even if I do not understand why because I'm not a fan of friends but you need to be patient and wait for the right

ones. If those girls who came at me are in your class then I'm glad you are not friends with them," I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "So you do not want me to be a slay Queen?"

Liyema: "Hell no," he said seriously and I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I'm glad we came even if it means our kids don't want to talk to us because they are having too much fun," he laughed softly.

Liyema: "Next week will be hell for us. They will throw endless tantrums,"

Lakhiwe: "Those are next week's worries. Right now I want to focus on us? Baby, tomorrow I want to go shark diving please.

Liyema: "You are afraid of sharks and quite frankly, so am I"

Lakhiwe: "That is exactly why I want to do it because I fear them. I want us to have a lot of fun. We never had a honeymoon," He listened while I listed all the things that I want to do but got interrupted by erotic kisses on my breasts. Oh well lists can wait until we are done. I'm not sure what earlier on was about. I'm

not sure why the room smelled like Bonga but it did not happen again. I hate being this woman who keeps on having to see a therapist because of bloody Bonga. I do not want traces of him in my life, especially not mine and Liyema's sex life. I love being with my husband in any way, shape or form. Even when we are just holding hands I love it. I asked him to sing to me again. I listened to him while he sang softly. I love his voice. I loved it the first day I heard it before I even knew who he was. Isn't it amazing how life works? The

first time I saw him we went on with our lives not knowing we would be married and have children. I wonder how many people have met their soulmate or walked past them at the mall not even knowing they will meet again? Life is full of mysteries but sometimes very beautiful ones that turn out be miracles.

FIFTY

MrSE

It has been a difficult past few days. The only thing that brings

me joy lately is my grandbabies. So much so that I have offered to pick them up at daycare since Liyema goes to that business classes after work and Khiwe is at the library studying until late. When I come home with the boys, I first play with them. They love the new oversized ball I got them. I just wish they could stop throwing it in each others faces. They play rough and I do not remember Liyema ever being like that. They must have gotten Lungi's naughty streak. Once I give them a snack and have them settle in front of the TV

watching cartoon, I start to cook dinner for my children. The last thing Khiwe will be in the mood for after a long day at school is cooking and I do not want them eating take aways. They have offered that I stay with them for a few days but I do not want to be in the way of a couple who has not even been married a year. The trip to Durban did my children good. I see those stolen kisses they give each other when they think no one is looking and it warms my heart. I actually miss Mlu too. You can not be married for over thirty years and not miss

the person you have spent almost all your life with no matter what they did. He has been refusing visits from us and I'm not sure what to make of that. A part of me fears that he has figured out that I am behind his arrest and is planning to make me pay.

Today is his hearing and he has applied for bail once again. I do not want him out on bail because he will use the freedom to get to the bottom of this. He has never laid a hand on me but I know he will kill me should he know what I did. I sat between both my sons in court waiting for them to

begin. I am lucky to have these two strong men next to me as my sons but I'm sure should the truth ever come out, they will hate me. I looked at Lungile who was looking at a young female lawyer. My wish is that he could find a woman and settle down. His relationship with that girl is filled with more downs than ups and I suspect it is because he has a weakness for beautiful girls. I looked at Liyema who seemed to be deep in thought. He found me starrng and smiled at me. I for some reason no longer worry myself much about him since he

got married. It is no secret that he is well taken care of at home. Yes, they have their fair share of troubles but he is happy with his wife. I raised my hands to kiss both their hands. Lungile kissed me on my cheek while Liyema brushed my hand with his thumb gently. I've done a lot of wrong but raising them was my best achievement yet. A part of me is glad Lulo is not here to see her father in court and in handcuffs. It would have broken my baby so much because she worshipped the ground Mlu walked on. The mood in court suddenly changed when

Dudunashe got called to the front. They whispered something in his ear, clearly no one else was suppose to hear. He looked at me and I knew something was wrong. My heart started to beat fast because I feared they figured everything out. Why else would he look at me like that? He walked towards us and the more the space between us got smaller, the more nervous I got. I jumped up before he even got to us.

Zola: "What is going on?," I looked at him.

Dudumashe: "Something has happened," he said quietly.

Lungi: "Please don't tell me my father got hurt while in jail. I have heard stories about the place," he said. I could hear the fear in his voice. Liyema just kept silent and looked at Dudumashe. Dudumashe: "Elephant escaped," he said in a whisper.

A prison escape was the last thing I expected to hear. Even Lungi's assumption of him being hurt on the inside seemed more realistic than an escape. We asked Dudumashe what would happen now and he said that there is a manhunt for Mlu. Saying every law official in town is looking for

him and no stone will be left unturned.

Liyema: "He seems to make stupid choices on a daily basis lately. He is a well known person, how the hell does he think he will go unnoticed?"

Dudumashe: "Would you have rather he rot in jail?"

Zola: "So you knew about this?" I asked softly.

Dudumashe: "Just pray he gets to his planned destination because if not, they will find him and he will rot in jail.

Lungi: "What kind of people are you?"

Dudumashe: "The kind that have put a lot of people in jail. He would never have survived in there for long. Get off your high horse and be thankful that your father is free. If there is one thing I can guarantee you, is that your father did not kill that woman. He is many, many things but a killer was never one of them.

Please excuse me, I need to go give comment to the press or will you go do it?"

He gave us all one look before heading out. Liyema and Lungile

did not look shocked at all. I guess they expected anything from their father after he got arrested for murder. I on the other hand am shocked to the core. He will hide while digging for the truth and if there is one thing Mlu is good at, it is finding out the truth. That is one of the reasons why he was successful. My boys lead me out of the courtroom. The journalists who were there to get an update of the case went crazy with questions when they saw us. They were taking pictures and sticking phones and microphones in our

faces. We managed to get to the car eventually. I asked them to drop me off at the house. I guess a part of me hoped to find him there. When we arrived the place was filled with police and search dogs. We gave them space to search the place but there was no sign of Mlu. Did they really think he would break out of jail to come to the house? We got asked a few questions and I'm glad Dudumashe kept Mlu's destination to himself because we could tell the police we know nothing and mean it.

Lungi: "Do you think he will make it to wherever safely?" he looked at his older brother.

Liyema: "Maybe him not wanting to see us was him planning his escape without being interrupted. I don't know if he will make it there safely, bro. I don't know what is happening in this family any more. I'm just glad it happened when we are grown because I don't think we would have handled it if we were still young and in school. Let me try to call Lala. I don't want her to see me on these online newspaper

pages and read about what happened on the papers,"

Zola: "Good idea, Ndoda," I said and Liyema went to call his wife. I will go lie down for a while. I have a headache," I said to Lungi.

Lungi: "I will make you some camomile tea. You always said it calms you down," he smiled.

Zola: "Thank you, my boy,"

Lungi: "When will I be called "ndoda" for once?," he asked and laughed.

Zola: "Bring me more grand babies. Preferably girls," I stood and he laughed.

I walked up the stairs and it was a daunting thing to do. My sister's place has no stairs, not a single one and I love it. I got to our bedroom and it always had both our scents in it but it smelled fresh today, almost like freshly ironed linen. I'm grateful to our help for coming in and keeping the place spotless. I went to lie on the bed for a while waiting for the headache to go away but it did not. Lungi came with the tea and some aspen.

Liyema returned saying Khiwe will come here straight from varsity. My boys went to the kitchen to prepare some food for us for when I wake up. I finally closed my eyes and got woken up by a strange dream where Mlu was stragling me. I had to remind myself that he is gone. I went to the cupboard that had all our old stuff. From the childrens baby clothes to old photos. I just wanted to remind myself of the happy times. I took out all the photos and threw them on the bed and the albums. We took a lot of pictures, great memories were

made indeed. Liyema came in holding a tray with foos and a fresh flower on it and Lungi just threw himself on the bed.

Zola: "Can't you see the pictures on that bed, Lungile Elephant?," they both laughed.

Liyema: "As if he cares. Whose child are you?" he laughed and looked at his brother and Lungi laughed too.

Lungi: "Carefull, I'm the uncle of your boys. You might have a mini Lungi there and I suspect Bandile," they laughed loudly.

Liyema: "Heaven forbid. My boys are as sweet as their mother," both Lungi and I looked at him. "Okay on good days they are sweet like their mother," we all laughed.

Zola: "I miss them already. I can not wait until school is out,"

Lungi: "I want to be gone by then. I don't know how you and sis Lakiwe manage to stay with those monsters full time,"

Liyema: "We made them so we got to take care of them and they are a joy,"

Zola: "Are you guys done having children?"

Liyema: "I'm not going to make my wife feel like a failure for not being able to carry more children, Mma. All I want is for her to get her degree right now,"

Lungi: "Dude, just get the help of a surrogate once again,"

Liyema: "Hell no. after what Lala and I went through. It is only by grace that we are where we are today. Things could have been so different. I'm content. We might adopt a baby girl should we want another. Plenty of babies who are

in need of homes. Mma here is your food. This one went get you a flower too,"

Zola: "Thank you both. Lungi get of my photos please," he stood and and Liyema put the tray down to look at them.

We looked at the old pictures and we laughed as we thought back on the days when they were taken. It always feels good to talk about Lulongke without crying. Liyema was the one who took her death the hardest. He loves Lungile but I know the love he had for his sister ran a little deeper. There was a knock on the

door. Laksiwe appeared looking worried but smiled when she actually realized that we were laughing under the circumstances. Lungile ran first to hug her to press Liyema's jealousy buttons but Liyema was not fazed. It proved just how secure he feels in this marriage. He went to his wife and hugged her.

Khiwe: "I came as soon as I could. How are you all doing?"

Liyema: "We are good, Lala? I hope you did not skip classes to come here,"

Lungi: "I used to skip a lot of classes. Its no big deal.

Liyema: "And you failed," they looked at each other.

Zola: "We are good, my baby. Having these two here feels good. I'm happy to see you too," I kissed her cheek.

Liyema: "Check how cute your hubby was, Lala" he showed her a picture of him as a baby and she smiled.

Khiwe: "You had a big head though, baby" Lungile laughed like he was being paid to do it.

Lungi: "High five, sis" they raised their hands and did a high five.

Liyema: "I'm not going to cuddle with you later on," he pretended to sulk.

Lungi: "I'll buy my sister a man sized teddy bear and a dildo just in case," they laughed.

Liyema: "Mma talk to your son before I stick my foot in his mouth,"

Khiwe: "I do not need any of those, baby," she wrapped her arms around him.

Zola: "Have you eaten, my baby?"
I looked her. She is always hungry when she comes from varsity.

Khiwe: "Liyema has kept a plate for me, Mma thank you. I'm starving. Let me go warm it up quickly,"

Liyema: "Need company?" he smiled at her.

Lungi: "That is code for naughty things but go on," Liyema showed him the middle finger.

The married couple made their way out of my room. I could hear Khiwe giggle and I knew they were doing the naughty things

Lungi talked about. I love that Lakiwe is comfortable in my house. Lungi looked through the other pictures until the married couple returned. Lakiwe kept feeding Liyema before putting a spoonful in her own mouth. I hope their marriage lasts. I hope they grow old together and die in peace at a very ripe age surrounded by their great grandchildren. Lungi took a picture and turned it around looking confused.

Lungi: "Check this one, Ta Lee, its one of Lulu," he said and gave Liyema a picture. He called Lulo Lulu.

Liyema: "Never seen this one before," he looked at me and showed it to me. My heart felt like it would escape my chest the way it was beating fast. I suddenly felt hot.

Zola: "Give me that!" I said without thinking and wanted to take the picture from him but he held it higher to check the back. "Liyema dammit give me the picture now!" I shouted and held my shaking hand up for the picture.

Khiwe: "Baby, give it please," she pleaded with her husband. Liyema lowered his hand and gave it to

me. My hands were shaking uncontrollably.

Lungi: "Mma, we have been looking at pictures of Lulu since we saw these old pictures and laughed. Why react like that to that picture?" I did not answer him.

Liyema: "I was just checking the date since I know you write dates behind the pictures. That one is wrong. That was two years before Lulo and I were born," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Mma. I did not mean to upset you. I've just never seen that picture of Lulo so I wanted to have a good look at her," he added.

Zola: "Leave me alone please," I said quietly.

Lungi: "Mma, what just happened. We were looking at a baby picture of Lulu and now this?"

Khiwe: "Let us do as she asks and leave her," she said while looking at her husband. I love how she is. She does not force matters.

Liyema: "We can't just leave her lik..."

Khiwe: "Ndlovu, please," she pleaded.

Liyema looked at his wife for a while and agreed to leaving my room. Lungi followed behind. I

went to close the door when they had all left and looked at the picture that was now just a ball of rolled up paper. I unfolded the picture and tried to straighten it with my hand. In it was a picture of Lulonke wearing her cute little pink dress. A tear fell on the picture. I don't know what happened but I lost it. I lost my sanity and started to throw things that were in my room like a mad woman. I started with the side lamps and broke it by throwing it against the wall. I took out most drawers and threw it on the floor. The kids stood by

the door shouting my name. I did not care and went on destroying my room while they watched. I'm glad they did not come in because I might have hurt them. Liyema took his chances but luckily I had a pillow in my hand and not a brick. I was crying and screaming. My boy held me so tightly to try and calm me down. I sank to the floor and he went down with me gently while holding me.

Liyema: "I'm sorry that she is not here with us, Mma. I'm so sorry," he said softly. I cried softly softly while still in his arms. "I'm sorry," he added again softly.

I know he was apologizing for the accident. An accident he had no way of preventing.

Khiwe: "Baby, please put her on the bed," she said. Liyema stood and picked me up like I had no weight. He laid me on the bed gently and all three of them looked at me.

Lungi: "I blame Ta for all of this. We would still be good had he not gone and screwed up,"

Zola: "Lakhiwe, please sit next to me, my baby," she did as I asked. "You two please excuse us," I looked at my boys.

Lungi: "But, Mma....," Liyema stopped him and pointed to the door. I think he knows I'll be safe with his wife. There is something about Laksiwe that makes people want to open up to her, well at least to me she has that effect. I realized when she was still going to be a surrogate for Liyema that I opened up to her better. The boys closed the door behind them. Kisiwe laid on her back facing the ceiling like I am. I turned to look at her and she turned to face me. We held hands and she brushed my hand gently.

Khiwe: "I understand, Mma. Had Liyema been in Tata's shoes and one of the boys died, I would have lost it too. In fact you have been strong for too long. Its okay to not be strong once in a while,"

Zola: "You do not understand, Khiwe. I've done so many bad things. I'm sure there is a seat in hell reserved for me," I laughed softly.

Khiwe: "Don't say that, Mma please," she brushed my arm.

Zola: "I tested positive. I lied," I broke down once again crying. She hugged me while crying.

Khiwe: "I know it must be terrifying but it is not the end of the world, Mma. Look at how healthy Liyema is. He takes his treatment and eats well. Please, just go see a doctor so you can find a way forward. I won't tell Liyema. He will hear it from you when you are ready. We love you so much"

Zola: "Y...y...you do not understand, my baby. I deserve it all. I deserve all of it. I'm not a good person at all,"

Khiwe: "Come live with us. I was not asking. We can not leave you

here alone. I know seeing the boys will make you happy,"

Zola: "No," I said while shaking my head.

Khiwe: "Yes. You will feel better tomorrow. Classes end early and we can go see your doctor together before Liyema gets home,"

Zola: "You do not understand, my baby,"

Khiwe: "Then make me please," she said softly.

Zola: "Its about Lulongke,"

Khiwe: "Mma I know you miss her but you have to find a way to

heal or you will make yourself sick. She has passed on and there is nothing we can do,"

Zola: "She is not dead, Khiwe. She is not dead. I'm such an evil person," I said. She could not hide the look of shock on her face. I curled up and cried my eyes out while shaking. My nose even started to bleed. She wanted to touch the blood but I had to remind her that she had no gloves on. She ran to the bathroom to get a towel and I tilted my head back to stop the bleeding.

Khiwe: "I'm confused, Mma. Liyema remembers seeing her dead. He said the way she got cut out of that car indicated how much it crushed her. After the nose bleed stops. You will get into a nice warm bath. You will soak yourself and relax. After that we are taking you home. In fact you can have that bath at our house. I think being here with all these pictures of Lulo out and what Tata did, your mind is confused and makes you say things that are not true. Mrs B has an fancy psychological name for what you are going through," she said but

it sounded like she was trying to convince both of us. The bleeding stopped and I went to soak the towel in hot water. The last thing I want is for someone to touch my filthy blood. Khiwe was putting the pictures back where they belong.

Zola: "I'm not going crazy, Laksiwe. Lulonke is alive or so I hope because the last time I saw her she was alive," she looked at me as if I have gone insane.

Khiwe: "But how?"

Zola: "Because I had two daughters both named Lulonke.

The one I last saw as a baby and the other who has died. Born two years apart. Lulonke is alive, but not the one you were told about. I had another Lulonke before Liyema's twin,"

Lakhiwe sank into the bed looking as defeated as I feel. It felt good to tell someone else. I was dating Mlu back in the day and we fell pregnant. He made it clear that he was not ready for a child and I had no means to raise one alone. Between the struggle and marriage, I had no time to build a career. While others made due with the poor education the

apartheid system offered them. I was underground making petrol bombs and arranging secret meetings between comrades for a better future for black South Africans, youth especially. I met the young, charming Mlungisi Elephant and I changed my life for him. I had to stop being the rough, tomboy me I was to fit in to his life. I had to bury my ways as a comrade and work on making him see me as a potential wife. He does not know my past. All he thinks is I was too poor to afford school. When I got pregnant he was still building his empire, one

he was not even sure he wanted me in it. His first solution was an abortion. He even gave me the money for it but I decided against it. Its easy to fool men about things concerning women especially when we had no social media. I lied and told him that I will have to stay at my family home for cleansing ceremonies after the abortion. He believed me and gave me extra money, that was how much he wanted to get rid of our child. I indeed went home to my grandmother and stayed until I gave birth and left the baby with her after a few

weeks to get Mlu to put a ring on it. My plan was for him to finally marry me and then I go home, get our child and bring her to him. We would be married so I thought he would not be angry at me for not having had the abortion. He finally put a ring on it and I asked to go see mt sick grandmother. My grandmother was not sick, I just wanted to go get my child, our child. When I arrived at my grandmother's place, she told me that my uncle and his wife took my child since they could provide for her. I had no problem with that all I

wanted was for her to tell me where my uncle and his wife took my baby so I would go get her. My grandmother did not know, she died not knowing and to this day, I still do not know where she is. I have hired private investigators to look for Lulonke Ngalo, since that was her name and that was my uncle's surname but they found nothing. The only thing my grandmother could give me was the only picture she had taken about Lulonke. I never told Mlu out of fear of his reaction and also the fear of losing my marriage. When I would watch

him with the Lulongke he knew, I would cry because he loved her. I couldn't understand why he asked me to abort our first child. He thinks that I had the abortion wherever he is. I think that was also the reason why it was so easy to watch him go down for something he did not commit. Had he never asked me to abort our child, I would never have had to give birth to her in secret. My uncle would never have disappeared with my child. I would still have a daughter. I suggested we name our second daughter Lulongke because I

thought it would fill the void, the gap in my soul but it did not. Losing our second Lulongke was unimaginable. I had lost yet another daughter. I think if I could I would have named Lakhiwe Lulongke too. The years of not knowing what my baby ate while I dined in style with her father was hell. Then the comments Mlu used to make "good thing we had children when we were ready and not when we were broke," made me realize he does not regret it. So telling him what I really did would have opened up a whole new can of worms. We

women are sometimes so desperate to keep a man that we lose ourselves out of desperation. I told Lakhiwe everything and she was just crying. I thought she would judge me and go tell my boys how evil their mother is but she just stood and gave me a long hug. My grandmother was the only person who knew, well my uncle and his wife too but to tell someone else felt good. I did not feel better about myself but I felt a bit free. A held my daughter in law and we both just cried. I don't know where my child is but I hope one day she gets to

hear that I wanted her and had plans to bring her home so she would grow up with her siblings. Had it not been for my uncle stealing her, she would have been here. Mlu would have been angry but maybe he would have loved her. I loved her so much. People think I mourn one Lulonke but I mourn two though one might still be alive. I wonder if she is alive and happy. I hope she is happy. I hope my uncle and his wife loved her as if they gave her life. If my uncle walks in I would not be angry, as long as he treated my child well and gave her love and

provided, I will not be angry at him. He had his reasons to take her, like I had mine to leave her. I found myself hating Mlu even more but I hated myself more for allowing it. I thought I was doing the right thing, I really did but I should have told Mlu where to get off when he asked me to terminate but instead begged for a ring. Something I have been regretting since. How will I tell my boys that the Lulonke they saw on the picture is not the one they knew? They looked so alike as babies. I do not blame their

brothers for thinking it is the sister they knew.

FIFTY ONE

Mrs E

After Lakiwe practically begged me to tell the boys what I did I finally gave in. She said maybe they could help. I couldn't put Lulonke in some lost loved ones TV shows because I feared what the families might say. I asked Lakiwe to give me some privacy just to collect my thoughts before telling my secret. Its true that a

woman is a deep ocean filled with secrets. There are things I am willing to tell like this thing of Lulonke but then there are those I will go to the grave with. I sat on my bed looking at the picture once again. I wondered if my first Lulo grew up to look like the second. I thought I had buried this part of my life but I have not. I was hoping she would find me and I wouldn't even have tried to deny her story. I wonder if she knows that she is adopted illegally so too. My phone rang. It was a private call. I answered

but there was silence on the other side of the line.

Mlufi: "Zola, its me" he whispered. I was both scared and relieved to hear from him. I got up from the bed and went to look out the window. "Zozo, can you hear me?," he added. My mouth felt dry.

Zola: "I'm here, Tata. Where are you, Mlu?," I whispered.

Mlu: "I can't tell you that. I just wanted to let you know I'm safe,"

Zola: "You escaped from prison. How do you expect your innocence to be proven when you run like a guilty person?"

Mlu: "Would you rather I rot in jail for something I did not do? I did not kill that woman but the evidence they planted to frame me was too much. I would have served years for a crime I did not do. In fact I would have died in there"

Zola: "So you still have no idea who is messing up your life like this?"

Mlu: "No but I will and I will make that person pay. Even prison will be nothing compared to what I will do. I will never be able to practice again. My reputation is tarnished. Tell Liyema to go back

to the firm and look after my legacy please. He listens to you," he pleaded.

Zola: "Liyema has just found happiness, Mlu. He is building his own legacy for his own sons. I can't ask so much of him.

Dudumashe will look after..."

Mlu: "He is not blood dammit!," he shouted at me. "You make me shout when I did not want to, not with this call because the next one will be after a long time. Okay, he does not need to practice but at least have him make sure my assets are taken care of,"

Zola: "Okay," I said softly. He did not even apologize for shouting. That is the thing I hate most about him. He does not use the word "thank you and I'm sorry" much.

Mlu: "Good" he said. Not thank you. "I don't know when I will be back or if I ever will. I just wanted to let you know I am safe. Not even Dudumashe knows where I am. For all I know he framed me. My money got frozen on my personal account but in our joint account there should be enough for you to use. Dudumashe will make sure you are well taken care of. If you

need more, sell the house and some of the cars. I won't stop providing for you because I know without me you will starve," he said with confidence.

Zola: "Liyema will never allow that," he laughed.

Mlu: "Oh please, he does not have enough to afford you. Let me go. I love you, Zola," he said. I was shocked because I could not remember the last time he said it.

Zola: "Mlu, I have something to tell you"

Mlu:" It will have to wait. I will call in a week or so"

Zola:" It can't. I never had the abortion," I blurted out and he kept quiet.

Mlu:" You came back without a baby," he said softly.

Zola:"I left her with my gran. You did not want her but I did. I couldn't kill her. I wanted her so badly, Mlu" I said. I told him the entire story.

Mlu:"Why do you not listen, Zola. So we have a child out there who does not know us? You are just stupid sometimes. We will talk

when I call again. Dammit, Zola. I gave you valid reasons why we couldn't have that child and you went against my judgement now this. We will talk next week,".

He ended the call and I sat there feeling crushed. Has he always been this cruel? Perhaps even narssistic. I wiped my tears off and joined the kids. The boys stood when they saw me but I told them to sit. Lakiwe just looked at me with eyes filled with pity. I told them their dad called. They asked where he was and I said I don't know. I even lied and said Mlu sent his love to them all.

They just nodded. Laksiwe made tea for us but Lungi had beer. We all went to the lounge.

Zola: "I have something to tell you. You will hate me but that is what I deserve,"

Lungi: "Hate our queen? Never!"

Liyema: "Are you ready to talk about earlier?" I nodded. I took a sip of my tea and took a deep breath.

Laksiwe: "Let us give her a chance to speak and I just ask that you both please try to see things from her perspective,"

Liyema: "I don't like the sound of this but since we have been having scandals I'm this family lately, I might as well hear more," he sat back.

Lungi: "We are listening, Mma" he looked at me.

Zola: "The picture you saw of Lulongke. It is Lulongke in the picture but not the one you knew," I suddenly had their attention even more. I slowly told my story between tears and stuttering but I told it and all they did was look at me.

Lungi: "So we have a sister that is not even our half sister but our sister in full out there and you did not bother yourself with her. An Elephant, Mma not a baby you had with a previous lover but a Hlubi with the same blood as ours through and through?" he said looking disgusted.

Liyema: "I do not understand why you did not tell your husband," he looked at me.

Zola: "He did not want her so I couldn't tell her before we got married. Once we were married she went missing and I couldn't find her. Your father would have

called me names every chance he got because of the choices I made. Even now when I told him, he didn't emphasize. He just called me stupid,"

Lungi: "Do you blame him?" he shouted.

Zola: "Would you have had me abort her instead huh? I did what I thought was a good decision back then. My plan unlike your dear father was not to kill her. It was to give her life and bring her to him and face the consequences. Even if those consequences were divorce and losing custody of her to your

father. I was not going to carry her for a whole nine damn months if I did not want her. I had a plan and it did not work. Judge me by my actions but not my bloody intentions. So yes, I blame your father because he started it. Do you know what it is like to be young, pregnant and scared?!" I shouted back at him. Who the hell does he think he is. He does not even know life as I do yet.

Liyema: "I actually hear you. So what now? The person who made you go to those extreme measures is gone. How do you want to move forward?" he looked at me. Khiwe

had a faint smile on her face. I guess she is proud of his response. Zola: " I have tried to find her for years. I ran out of options so all I hope now is for her or the people who took her to look for me. My uncle knows me so I assume he does not want to bring my child back," I said while looking at him.

Lungi: "If I was here I wouldn't bother. I'm sure she is happy where she is without this drama"

Liyema: "She is an Elephant. Like you said, this is not Mma's love child with another man. She is us.

If you want her back then let us try again. Maybe make the search public"

Lungi: "Oh what is one more headline about this family?" he asked sarcastically.

Zola: "Lungi, would you rather I had done what your father asked?" I asked softly and he looked down.

Lungi: "No Mma but... I don't know. I just learned I have another sister who is Lulu too. It's a lot...No I wouldn't have preferred you to have done what

he asked but it is a lot," he said with sadness.

Zola: "I know and I am sorry. I just couldn't keep quiet anymore. Ndoda, I do not know what I want to do moving forward. I do not know," I sat down and Khiwe hugged me.

Liyema: "Call the Elephant elders. Tell them what you did because I making this search public soon. I will not have my own out there. I will not let go of another sister. Don't ask me to. You know how important family is to me. I can not look away. Even if she is dead, I will at least know rather than

wonder. We are going to Mtata as soon as I can get away from work for a few days. I'm glad you did not abort her. I just wish you told your man to stick his money up his ass and go raise your child with the help of your family,"

Zola: "I hear you but then your father would have left me and I wouldn't have had you and your other siblings. I perhaps would have had other kids but they would not be you. You are who you are partly because Mlu's genes are in you. Don't ask me to regret you children too please,"

Lungi: "I need to go,"

Liyema: "Me too. Baby, I will pick the boys up later. I don't think I will focus in class later on. I will go make arrangements with the team so I can go to Mtata with Mma to tell the elders. I love you and I will see you later," he kissed his wife. "I love you too, Mma" he kissed my cheek. "You are not going anywhere. Our mother needs you. I know you want to go binge drinking but you and I are now her protectors while Ta is away. Get ready to go to Mtata," he pointed at Lungi.

I watched him walk out of the door. My boy has already filled the

position of family leader and he does it with such kindness and command at the same time. Lungi went to get another beer. At age 27 he is a bit immature but I understand this time around.

Lakhiwe and I went upstairs to pack my clothes since I will stay with them. I don't like it but I can't be alone. I fear what I might do to myself. I told Lungi he could go because I'm in safe hands with Lakhiwe. He was not ready to be around me and I couldn't blame him. If I could find a way to not be around myself, I'd take it. Now I just need to

prepare myself for the Elephant elders. I think my mother in law will go back to not liking me again. I'm ready for anything they throw my way.

LIYEMA

I drove around and could only think about Mma's confession. The thought of another Lulongke who is also my sister being out there bothers me. What state is she in? Is she married? Heck is she even alive? I'm a family oriented person. I love unity and support within families. I'm the one who always makes time to see the extended family during

December break because the thought of being surrounded by blood is important. Had Lala just been the mother of my children and not my lover, I would still have made sure I look after my boys. I drove to the office to do some work. I called Lucky in whom I have a promotion to into my office. I told him I will need a few days off and if he could stand in for me. He was too happy to help. I'm still keeping a close look at our finances so he knows to not mess with anything. I called my father's brother to tell him that we are coming and that he should

tell his mother and siblings. A visit from me came as no shock to them but to hear I'm coming with Mma and Lungi was a shock. Those two went there only when it was a must and Ta was around. I asked my receptionist to book me tickets and she got a flight to the Eastern Cape for tomorrow night. I also called Pat so she would she would help Lala with the boys until I'm back. I worker for a few hours when I got a call from Mma saying Lungi needed to be picked up from some bar. I knew he would go drinking. I drove to the place and found him

sloshed with his head face down on the bar. This boy is almost 30 yet behaves like this. The barman helped me get him in the car. He will just have to come back for his car tomorrow. I hated that I would have to pick the boys up while the car reeked of booze. I got to the daycare and told Ma Eunice about our trip. I miss telling her stuff. She seem to have more kids now. The boys all ran to me when they saw me. I used to be able to pick them all up at once but now it's a mission. Ma Eunice helped me buckle them up. I could see she was disgusted by

the alcohol smell. The boys did not seem fazed. They just kept saying "Nci" which is their way of saying "Tamci" but "Nci" is passed out. I drove home and found Mma's car in the garage. I called Lala to help me. She got the boys inside while I had to get the drunk heavy "baby" inside to the guestroom to sleep it off. Mma also went upstairs. I guess to make him comfortable. I did not even kiss my wife when I got home. I found her cooking my favourite. I kissed her, my peace. I put the TV on for the kids. They have these cartoons they

don't like missing after daycare. Lala gave me snacks to give to them. These boys love food like their father. I made coffee for Lala and I and she gave me veggies to peel while we spoke. We could see the boys from the kitchen so they were all calm and focused on the screen.

Liyema: "So you really have no problem with us leaving?" she smiled.

Khiwe: "I will miss you but I know why you need to do this. Thanks for arranging sis Pat because I have an assignment I need to work on this weekend,"

Liyema: "I wouldn't just leave without getting you help first. You sure you..."

Lakhiwe: "Baby, I'm sure. So how do you think they will take it?"

Liyema: "I know some will blame her for everything. I'm hoping Makhulu understands," I chewed on a carrot.

Lakhiwe: "And how are you feeling about it. I know you have to be family head now that Tata is gone but you don't have to act as tough as a nail with me" she said and wrapped her arms around my shoulders while her face nestled in

my neck. I turned my head to kiss her cheek.

Liyema: "I'm not good. I wish I could say I'm as understanding as I let on but I need to man up.

Mma will need someone in her corner in this family meeting and Lungi will not be that person,"

Lakhiwe: "I'm proud of you and how you have been handling things so far. I really think she wanted the plan to work. I believe her intentions were pure. Things just did not go according to plan"

Liyema: "That is what pissees me off. The fact that a plan had to be made in the first place like Lulongke was some bastard child. Yes, she was born out of wedlock but she is no different from us. What if we find her happy and ruin her life?"

Lakhiwe: "What if you find her unhappy and meet her at just the right time? I don't understand how people can take a child like it's an object. They had no right to take her,"

Liyema: "It's done. Where will we even begin to find her? I've been thinking that since Mma's private

methods failed. I will have to put the picture on a TV show. Maybe she will see it and call in. I hate that I would have to hang Mma's laundry to the public but I have to,"

Mma: "I don't care if my filthy laundry is hung for the world to see. If it can help I don't mind. I also want to thank you two so much. I'm sorry that you have to go on this unexpected trip with me leaving your family but I appreciate your support, Ndoda and you too Laksiwe,"

Laksiwe: "I have a feeling you would have done the same had

the tables been turned. I can research all the TV shows who reconnect loved ones and write to them all and send out the letters when you say so,".

Mma: "Send them as soon as you are done. The Elephants will not agree to a public thing. I hired top private investigators and they will want me to do that again and I can't. I want to die having seen her again."

Liyema: "Don't talk like you're terminally ill. You will meet her and spend years with her. Is taking Lungile a good idea?"

Mma: "Yes, I do not want my daughter to get calls from clubs and bars to go pick Lungile up. He comes with. That boy needs to grow up," she looked upstairs.

Lakhiwe: "Don't compare him to Liyema, Mma. They will never be the same," she said while stirring the pot and putting in veggies.

Mma just kept quiet. I don't think Mma compares us or am I not in a position to be objective?

Mma: "Let me go watch with my babies. I will miss them a lot" she left us alone.

Liyema: "How is varsity?" I asked. She gave me an appreciative smile.

Lakhiwe: "Academic wise it's good, baby. Thank you for asking and I no longer go out of my way to make friends. Sindi came to campus this morning. I think she will come over Sunday afternoon after church. I'm so glad I learned how to drive for such situations when you will be away from home,"

Liyema: "I'm glad too. Do you think she will like us? Lalonke I mean."

Lakhiwe: "Let us find her and take it from there. I learned doing that from you," we both smiled. "I think it will be hard at first but once she is over the shock, she might like us," she kissed me.

We shared the longest hug ever. I just wanted to be in her arms. I gave Mma our flight details. Makhulu called her and she went up and spoke on the phone for about an hour. I guess she was updating Makhulu about Ta. I went to play with my kids and bathed them once we were done. Lungile woke up after a few

hours and went to get his car and go home. He said he would meet us at the airport tomorrow but I will have to wait and see. We fed the children and put them to bed. Lala and I first got some of our work finished until late at night. Mma went to bed early. I'm guessing she is nervous and stressed about tomorrow.

Honestly I am too. My wife and I went to bed. Usually I would want to make love to her all night since we will be apart for a day or two but I was not okay so we just cuddled. I know this Lulongke won't be like the one we

knew but if they looked so much alike as babies, I imagine them to have grown to look the same too. Lulonke always wanted a sister and I wish she was here right now. Or perhaps it's good she is not because of everything that had happened lately and her having had a sensitive heart. Maybe she would not even have liked another girl stealing our attention. I miss her. I now think Mma saw her as a replacement and if I'm right it was not fair on my sister. If Mma could keep such a secret for so many years, I shudder when I

think of what other skeletons she and Ta have in those deep closets of theirs. I don't care about that now though. At the moment all I want is to bring one of my own back home. I can't stand in for Ta as head of the family and not make sure we are all home. I will bring her home even if she is dead and buried. I will get her remains from the wilderness and bring her to the family burial site. She was an Elephant and Ta might not have wanted her but I do. The idea of an older sister sound good.

FIFTY TWO

Mrs E

We arrived at my in laws house too late for us to talk. We all decided it was best we talk in the morning when we have all had a goodnight rest. I woke up and wore my Makoti clothes which is not my favorite things to put on but I have to respect culture. The heat did not help much either. I had to wake up early to give aid to my sickly mother in law. It seems Mlu's case hit Makhulu Elephant more than I realized. She looks older now and is more reserved. I made tea and

served it with scones. There is always scones and home made bread in this house. I sat down head bowed in front of my in laws like a good little Makoti. I don't think Mlu deserves it but I do not want to give his mom more reason to get sicker by disrespecting her. Liyema and Lungi sat beside me. They have nothing to worry about. Should the family hate me they will not be affected because they are the sons of the family breadwinner and most likely the beneficiaries of Mlu's estate. The uncles went on and on about how unhappy

they were when I was not home when they visited after Mlu's arrest but when they were in Cape Town they claimed to understand. Bunch of two faced ugly men. I could see Mama is not well by her being so quiet. She never bites her tongue so she must be troubled which made me wonder if we chose the right time to come with such big news.

Liyema took control of the situation by saying we are not here to hear what a bad wife I have been lately but because of a completely unrelated issues. I love how he can take control, command

and lead without disrespecting elders. It is definitely not something he learned from his father. Lakhiwe's grandfather is like that and I know Liyema holds him to high regard so he might be looking at the old man as a good example. Lakhiwe's family might be poor compared to us but I have realized that they are rich in love, support, unity and respect. I guess that is why my son is so content with his wife and her family. The Elephants lent us their ears. Liyema looked at me and asked if I'm ready to talk about it. I'm not ready but I

must. I laid my story before them and the three brothers were clapping once and putting their hands over their mouths like old gossiping women. Mama never had daughters. Like Lakiwe and Liyema she had four boys but Mlu's female cousins were raised by her so he kind of had sisters too. I looked at Mama. We all know that her opinion counts most. Liyema explained my reasons more.

Peter: "Never! Mlu would never ask you to kill his own blood. I do not believe you. I am sure you got pregnant by another man and

that is why you did what you did. That child is not an Elephant," one of the uncles said.

Liyema: "I will not allow you to disrespect my mother, Tamci. Had you lived with us you would have known that your brother was no saint,"

Thomas: "We knew him since he was a baby so do not tell us that. We knew our brother and we know that he would never do such a thing. Go and find the father of this child and get his blessings to find her. You will not drag our name through the mud any more

than it has been tarnished already,"

Zola: "I was not looking for permission to go look for my child. I was only telling you out of respect for this family. Mlu has taken a lot from me and it is time I reclaim my power. I will look for my daughter who is an Elephant through and through and there is nothing you can do to stop me," I looked at the brothers.

Thomas: "Nozolile, you will not come from your suburbs to my father's house to disrespect my mother and us. You think with

Mlu gone we will allow you to do as you please," he shouted.

Lungi: "I'm not happy with this Tat'omdala but if Mma says this child was from this family then that child was from this family,"

Liyema: "Is from this family. Do not talk like she is dead,"

Pieter: "Get out of my father's house. How convenient that you come to us only now that Mlu can not defend himself. Nonsense, man nonsense!"

Makhulu: "Hey, hey shut up!" she shouted unexpectedly and we did not know who she was telling

that to so we waited for her to speak.

Liyema: "We are sorry for coming with this when you are ill, Makhulu. We meant no disrespect. I will search for my sister and I might go on TV to get help. The last thing we wanted was for you to find out that way. I'm sure as a mother yourself you understand where Mma was coming from. She loved Lulongke a lot,"

Pieter: "Imagine the disrespect to my niece's memory by naming her after a love child you wanted to kill. Sies, Nozolile" he literally

spat on the floor. How disgusting can a person get?

Makhulu: "Shut up!" she shouted while looking at her son. They were all shocked. Fezile the last born was always quiet so I was not shocked by his silence.

Thomas: "Mama this woman is the one who you should say that to. Immoral woman and I'm sure Mlu is where he is hiding like a thug because of her," I looked down because that was true.

Fezi: "I know about the child, Makoti," he said quietly. It was as though someone had given me

water after days lost in the desert. Liyema looked at me and smiled.

Makhulu: "I know about the child too," she said. It was as though a waterfall appeared in my desert. If she knew I'm okay.

Thomas: "Ma, you are saying that because you fear this one will stop giving you money since Mlu is gone:". I'm so happy non of my boys got their uncles stupidity.

Makhulu: "My husband left me a farm with livestock. I do not need financial assistance. Maybe you are the one afraid that Mlu's

money will stop feeding you. Look, Zozo," she called me by my nickname which was a good sign. "I know about the pregnancy. To say I knew about the baby would be untrue because I thought you went through with it. Fezile and Mlungisi have always been close. Mlu was comfortable telling his youngest brother his secrets because well we all know Fezi is a man of few words," she smiled at her son. "I once overheard Mlu talk about getting you pregnant but I had not met you yet. You were still a girlfriend back then. He told Fezi how he managed to get you

pregnant after one time of being together. Tell her what he said Fezile,"

Fezile: "I was practically a child back then but I remember him saying he was not ready to be a father,".

Liyema: "He should have learned to use a damn condom," he mumbled but the elders didn't hear.

Makhulu: "I didn't confront him that day but I did a few months after but he told me it was too late. That you had the abortion. My heart was shattered because

it would have been my very first grandbaby from my biological children but it was done. I had a cleansing for him because he said you stayed to have your cleansing too,"

Zola: "Why have you never thrown this in my face during our ugly fight, Mama?"

Makhulu: "Because I knew that you did what my son asked of you. Maybe had you made the choice on your own but I had no right to blame you. I made peace with the child being gone. When you were pregnant with the twins and I saw it as a sign from the

ancestors that they forgave their son for making you do such. I was hoping when our relationship improved you'd open up but that never happened," Zola: "So do I have your blessings to find her?"

Makhulu: "Had you come to me sooner we would have looked a long time ago. You have my blessings go find MaMlambo, bring MaMlubi back home, MaDladla needs to know that we want her and are ready to welcome her home. Bring one of our Elephant princess home," when she called Lulonke by the family clan names

we both cried. I got goosebumps. I sat with my sons comforting me. I did not care what the brothers said but if their mother spoke that was the last word.

Liyema: "Thank you, Makhulu. Hlubikazi will be brought home, no matter the condition we find her in. She will step foot in her grandfather's house, I promise you. Thank you, Mampondomise, thank you" he knelt and kissed his grandmother's hands. She brushed his head softly like she is blessing him. These two have always had a bond. I would not be

surprised if Mama left Liyema her farm should she die.

Peter and Thomas sat like someone took their favourite toy. Of course I will stop supporting their grown asses. They have wives and grand children but sucked my husband dry in the name of family. Those who wanted Lulongke home came with ideas to find her. Mma suggested we go to East London and ask my grannies neighbours. She said maybe my uncle had a friend he told about where he was taking my child. We had her full blessings and Fezile drove with us to East

London. I appreciated him because Liyema is young and elderly men prefer another elderly man to talk to. We finally got to East London. I have a small family. In fact right now it is just me, my sister and distant aunts. We sold our grandmother's house a long time ago. We went next door where I remember my uncle used to drink with a friend. We indeed found the man sick and old. We talked with the utmost respect and he was glad to answer.

Tata : "Ngalo married a Swazi woman so I will not be surprised

if he took the child there. I remember the day they took the child well. Your grandmother was begging him to wait for its mother but his wife said there was no time. That child cried so much. It was as if she knew she was taken without her mother's permission. The last time I saw them was when they drove off I'm an old blue Mazda. I swear to you they never came back. I have been here all my life. That was the last I saw them. I suspect Swaziland,"

I cried when he said my baby was crying as though she knew she

was being stolen. Something tells me she is not in Swaziland. I don't know what but something just tells me she is in South Africa. I've never met my uncles wife so I don't know her. I just assume she could not have any kids of her own so she comforted herself with my child. A child I did not abandon. I merely kept her safe. We felt more lost than ever. Lungi suggested social media. He took a picture of the baby and put it on his social pages. Liyema called his Lala to tell her to send the letters she wrote to the TV shows she found. We drove back

to my in-laws. I hope we will get feedback soon. I've heard of the power of social media and I pray it works for us. Liyema said a prayer when we had a chance. He is the only one at home who goes to church. I might just join him and his family since I'll be with them for a few days. Hopefully Lulo is a social media addict and see herself there and forgive us for making her public but we are desperate. We want her, we need her.

LAKHIWE

I knew that they were not going to have much luck finding her on

the first day. I'm just happy Makhulu gave her blessing. That woman is a good person but people judge her by her serious facial expression and think she is rude. I personally love my in laws. I said a short prayer once again for Lulo to be found. I sent emails to all the shows I found. She or someone who knows her is bound to see at least one of the means we used to find her. I will have a sister in law. I hope she likes us. I was at the varsity computer lab for some research since the boys would not allow me to work at home. I finished very late in

the afternoon and went to buy the healthiest take away I can find. I walked into the restaurant and placed an order for a take away. I was chatting with hubby on WhatsApp when some guy greeted me. He introduced himself as Andile. He was okay looking. Short and a yellow bone.

Andile: "I've seen you around campus a few times. You like being alone don't you?" he asked. If only he knew I had no choice.

Lakhiwe: "I'm introverted like that," I lied.

Andile: "Wow the first thing we have in common. I'm a loner too. Maybe that is why I have been so attracted to you. You do finance right?". His question made me feel uncomfortable. "Don't worry, I'm not stalking you" he added and laughed awkwardly.

Lakhiwe: "I have to go. My husband is waiting for me," I lied because I wanted him to be scared.

Andile: "You are driving the car which is unusual. I've seen you get off the shuttle all the time meaning the car is with your husband elsewhere. Now the car

is with you so he must be away or something," my heart started to beat faster. "Once again. I'm not stalking you. I'm just observant. Personally I would never let my wife go by shuttle to school. I would drop her off everyday and pick her up,"

Waiter: "Your takeaway, mam," she said with a smile and handed me the warm brown paper bag.

Lakhiwe: "Bye, Andile,"

Andile: "Have a great evening, Lakhiwe,"

I got out of there fast because I did not give him my name yet

he said it. I think this guy has been stalking me at school. I got in the car locked the doors and drove off. I breathed easier but I have to tell my husband about this creep. I saw car following me and I tried to lose it but it took all the curves that I did. I drove to where I saw some people and I planned to make a hell of a scene. I could drive home but the danger would follow me home where my kids are and I was too far from the police station. I read thugs hate attention so I was going to have attention on him. I pulled over and he did too.

It was this Andile guy and I asked him why he is following me loudly for everyone to hear. Next thing a lady pulled a gun on Andile. Her: "Why are you following her?" she asked and put the gun right on his face. Could my day get any scarier?

Andile: "Her...her phone. She left it on the counter at the restaurant. I wanted to give it to her", he stuttered. His Jean was wet, he had wet himself. I looked at my own pants just in case. I went to grab my phone. He went into his car and sped off. I wanted to do the same.

Her: "Relax, sweetheart it's a damn toy for protection," she said. "I think the boy has a crush on you. So you won't even thank me?" she asked. I turned slowly. Toy or not I was scared. I just wanted to go-to my babies.

Lakhiwe: "Thank you," I said softly.

Her: "Be careful. Housewives are targets in these streets. I see the combie and four car seats so I know the housewife starterpack," I looked at her and the fear was gone.

Lakhiwe: "I'm no housewife. I'm married with kids but I'm also a student," she clapped hands.

Her: "Good for you, sweetheart. Have your own shit so you won't depend on your man. What do you study?" she walked closer. A car hooted but she showed it the middle finger. "We are not for sale. Can't you see we are a bunch of housewives. Go fuck your own wife," she shouted and the car drove off. "Don't worry, it's really a fake. I won't hurt you. I don't hurt other women unless they ask for it. So what will you be someday?"

Lakhiwe: "I wanted to be a chartered accountant but I guess I'll be something else in the finance department,"

Her: "Why aren't you studying towards the field of your dreams. Hubby too uptight to be with a woman who will make big bucks?" we both laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I was not accepted for my first choice. I've warmed up to my course though. What do you do?" she laughed.

Her: "Look what I'm wearing, where I'm standing and the sneeze that just hooted for me.

Don't act dumb. It does not suit you,". I really did not look at all that. I realized she was an escort. She looked somewhat like the one in Durban.

Lakhiwe: "A woman wearing a short dress and standing by the street with sleezy men hooting at her does not always equal to a prostitute," she laughed and clapped her hands.

Her: "What else could it mean?"

Lakhiwe: "For all I know you are a CEO and you are heading to that club to meet your other friends to dance the night away after a

week of clenching deals and giving men hell in the boardroom. I get comments from sleezy men too so you are not special and not alone in that," she laughed.

Her: "What an interesting day! Wow me a CEO?"

Lakhiwe: "What did you want to be? Or are you in your wanted profession?" I asked not wanting to judge her. She is beautiful.

Her: "A hot shot lawyer. No, a prosicutor wait, a judge," I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "So like I don't know where in finance I want to be.

You don't know where you want to be in law, we have a thing in common. Is it enough for you to go have coffee with me at that place over there to say thank you?"

Her: "People will stare at you. You might not see a prostitute but they do. Maybe my clients are In there too,"

Lakhiwe: "Well F them," she laughed.

Her: "Fuck. It's okay to say it. Okay since we have something I'm common now. I will take that coffee and food,"

Lakhiwe: "Deal. Name?"

Her: "Blue Diamond. You?"

Lakhiwe: "Black Diamond," she laughed so much.

Blue: "I like you. A quick coffee.

Black Diamond, thank you for treating me like a human being.

It has not happened in a while,"

Lakhiwe: "Lets go. We will talk more inside. If your clients or people stare just say "You get a F, you get a F and everybody get a F you," she laughed. Such a beautiful woman.

We went to the cafe across the road and people looked at her like

she was filthy. I could see she was not comfortable at all. I decided to get take away coffees and we went to sit in the car and ate. We sat and joked for a while. I sensed she did not want to be asked deep stuff so I did not want to scare her off.

Blue: "So won't hubby be upset that wifey is out late?"

Lakhiwe: "Hubby is not an uptight man," she nodded while eating. She looked very much like that woman in Durban and that woman looked like Lulo and right now we are looking for Lulo the first so I had to ask. "Any chance you were

in other places recently?" she looked at me. I hope she won't close up.

Blue: "Yeah there are those special occasions when I get booked by VIP clients so yeah I travel. I was in Durban a while ago. Why don't you judge me?"

Lakhiwe: "I was not always this well put together person. I have no right to judge. So where are you from?"

Blue: "From all over really. We never settled. You?"

Lakhiwe: "Queenstown but ran from home with a man in my late

teens. We get into situations and we learn from those. I got out of mine so anyone can too,"

Blue: "Not all of us," she looked down. "Anyway how old are you to have four baby seats behind us?" I laughed and told her about the boys and asked her age. "In my line of work I can't say my age. You're beautiful,"

Lakhiwe: "So are you, Blue," we smiled. "So are you here for a VIP client? When are you leaving?"

Blue: "Please, Black Diamond we are not and can not be friends"

she looked out the window and saw a car parked where I met her. "I have to go" she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "wait before you go. Since you are well traveled I thought you might help me find someone. It's a baby picture but some people never change. Here is a paper I printed her picture on" I reached for my bag at the back and gave her the paper I printed Lulu's picture on. She didn't look at it. She just put it in her bag in a rush.

Blue: "I will look at it when I'm alone, okay. Thank you for the

company. In another world we would have formed a friendship," Laksiwe: "My number is at the back of the picture. If you are here on another VIP trip, call me. My name is Laksiwe by the way," she laughed.

Blue: "Bye, Lala and be safe please. Tell hubby about the creep. Thanks again," she held my hand and opened the door. I stopped her.

Laksiwe: "I figure that is your boss and he has seen you in a car so he expects money for your time. Here is R600. I hope it's enough,"

Blue: "Thank you so much. You gave me money for two clients and I had to get two clients for the day to be done. Now I can go straight to bed and sleep. Thank you,"

I just smiled and nodded. I watched the old ugly man get out of the car. I got the creeps suddenly. Such an old man pimping out girls. I drove home thinking of excuses to give Liyema on what I spent the petrol money on. He might have a new big client but we are still on a tight budget. I was sure as hell not going to tell him that I gave it to a

prostitute and I was sure as hell not going to tell him one sat in our car. After the Durban trip he showed me how much he got disgusted by girls in the sex industry. I was not going to tell him I met the girl who might be one who offered us a threesome. He will wash our car with bleach after that. Blue might not be Lulo but she might know Lulonke. How will I explain that I need extra money to buy petrol? Maybe I can say Andile mugged me but he will find Andile and all hell will break loose. What is the case with this Andile? I

will tell Liyema about him for sure. I thought about how weird it is that a prostitute was able to be social with me yet students at varsity can not. We really should not judge books by their cover. For all I know Andile had a plan. He could have kidnapped me when I got out to confront him but got scared by Blue's fake gun. I drove around being very vigilant until I got home safely. I found my babies playing so late at night. Pat must have given them sweets. I called Liyema and he said they are considering going to Swaziland. I don't know what I

think about that but maybe they have a plan. I told him I lost the petrol money and he said he will transfer more later. But my husband though. I expected some harsh words but no. I played with my babies until they got tired and fell asleep on the mat in the lounge. I picked them up one by one to the room. I wanted them next to me tonight so I put them in our bed. Sis Pat went to bed too and I chatted with Liyema while the boys snored so softly, it's cute. I was thinking about Blue and her dream of being a prosecutor but instead

ended up on the street as a prostitute. Life can be cruel to some. That is why I never take what I currently have for granted. I went on my knees to pray for my family, myself and also included Blue I'm this prayer. She seems like a decent woman. May God help her live the life she hopes to. I like her but it's sad that I will never see her again. I'll keep her in my prayers. God never fails His children no matter the situation. I'm a living testimony of that.

FIFTY THREE

Blue

It's been three weeks since I left Cape Town but I couldn't stop thinking about the lady that I met that day. She made me feel like I was someone in a world that saw filth when they look at me. The fear I felt when I saw her confront that guy made me to act because I thought he wanted to hijack her or worse kidnap her. The toy gun was used when I saw a client who liked roleplaying earlier that day. I'm glad that jerk did not see that it was fake because I know what some men

are capable of. I can write a book about the horrors I've seen men do to women, myself included.

Being a sex worker puts me at more risk of violence from men.

I've had a life no woman should ever have to live. Selling my body is all I have done and I suspect I will die a prostitute. During the first years I used to cry myself to sleep but my skin has gotten thicker. I took a bath preparing for my next client. There was a knock on the door and the person just let themselves in. It was my father who by the way is also my pimp.

Mike: "Hurry up, this client hates waiting. He is a celebrity so you have to be descreet," he said and I rolled my eyes.

Blue: "I'm the best girl you have. You know that man will wait on me. I will be done now. Get out please,"

Mike: "You are close to forty years so drop that confidence because soon I will have to provide for you since you won't bring in any money. Drop the confidence and get the hell out of that bath," he ordered. Many people would have the shock of their lives should I tell him

that my father is my pimp. My parents are Mike and Sophie. Sophie ran illegal booze shops wherever we moved to. My siblings and I were all born in Swaziland. I had eleven siblings and all of us were girls. A lot of people used to ask our parents why they had so many children. I remember they used to say they kept trying hoping to have a boy. I thought we were a normal family until my two older sisters came to me once begging me to run away with them. I did not understand why they wanted me to run from a decent home where

our parents were so I declined. They went ahead with their plan and managed to run away from home only to be found dead close to the South African border a few days later. I was shattered because I did not understand much back then. I got to understand why they ran from home when I turned 16. Sophie asked me to do a little "favour" for one of her shebeen customers. That was the first time I touched a man's manhood. When I turned 17 they had me have full sexual experiences with one or two men a week. It messed me up so

much that I kept failing at school which resulted in them having to pull me out of school. I realized that we were no normal family when I learned that other parents did not ask their children to sell their bodies. I also decided to try and run away from home. Sophie found me before I even left the yard. I then got told about what would happen to me should I try it again. She in so many words told me that I would be found dead just like my sisters and that was when I realized that they have eyes and ears everywhere. The only people who

knew about my late sisters escape was me and I told no one. I stayed in fear and did my part for their dirty business. I feared for my younger sisters as they got older. I wanted to protect them but I couldn't protect myself. One by one we all got introduced to the sex industry. No one ever tried to run because by that time we had all heard what happens should we run. My younger sister, the one who comes after me, my best friend could not take it. She committed suicide a few months in. That was a loss I have never been able to get over.

It crushed me and my other sisters. Sophie died in a fire when I was in my mid teens. She was my mother but I felt nothing. In fact I was happy that she perished in that fire but unfortunately the fire claimed the lives of two of my younger sisters too. Once again my heart got crushed by the losses. My sisters and I have went through the most together. Mike became a cruel bastard after his wife died. He got news that the police were on his tracks. Our new neighbors alerted the police after seeing different men leave our house on

a daily basis. Mike decided that it would be best to move and that was how we landed in South Africa. Things worked out good for him. He started an elite escorting business and myself and six of my sisters were his escorted for the first few months but business soon picked up and other girls joined us. No one in the business knows that Mike is our biological father because we stopped calling him Dad and call him by his name even in private. I'm sure most would ask why we never ran when we arrived in South Africa but the fear of

death is crippling my sisters and I. We are a close bunch and nothing could separate us, nothing. We have each other's backs all the time. I'm surprised that none of us haven't broken apart though. I guess we no longer cry because our skins have thickened. Our names are our favourite color and Diamond at the back. We have real names but we don't use them. They would make us sound boring and in our industry boring does not sell.

My sister, Cathy, I mean Purple Diamond walked in. She went straight to the corner of the

room where the strong drinks were. She poured two glasses of whiskey and drank them clean. I assume she had a difficult client. Blue: "So what was his request?" I asked while putting my weave on.

Cathy: "To do it on the balcony on the 10th floor with me hanging over the damn thing. That bastard nearly dropped me to my death, Blue" she started to cry and drink more.

Blue: "I'm sorry, my honey. I will tell Mike you are done for the night," I hugged her.

Cathy: "Why do our own parents make us do this, Blue. Did they have us so they could sell us as like we are pieces of meat? What if we were boys? Would they have done it too? I can't go on anyone. I can't," she broke down.

Blue: "I know but I'm working on a plan to free us...."

Cathy: "So you have been saying for years. I will also kill myself," she cried more and my heart was in pieces but I couldn't cry. I'm the oldest amongst them so I have to stay strong for them

Blue: "It is not as easy as I thought. The last thing I want is for our bodies to be found in some ditch,"

Cathy: "Maybe that is best. Anything is better than this.

Death sounds kinder than this,"

Mike opened the door and we both pull ourselves together. He hated it when we cried.

Mike: "Dammit Blue, I will not call you again. Do not make me angry. I would hate to break one of your damn ribs again," he shouted.

"And then, what is the case with this one?" he pointed at Cathy. I walked to the door quickly so he

wouldn't have to see her face. I led him outside the room saying I'm ready to leave.

We drove to a nice place in Mosselbay. He gave me the room number of my client and I went in. In all the years of doing this, I still get afraid before meeting a client because I do not know what is waiting for me on the other side of the door. Cathy almost went ten stories down because of her client's crazy request. We can't say no either because they have paid for our time, they own us for the hours they booked us. Only Cathy and I

are in Mosselbay, the others are in Mike's friends brothel. Mike has loyal workers who make sure we get delivered to the client should he not be able to. I knocked on my clients door. A good looking young man opened while licking his lips. I had to put who I truly am aside and be Blue Diamond. I opened my coat to reveal the skimpy outfits I had on. He moved aside and let me in. I asked him why I was there. I expected some crazy demand but he said for now we could chill and drink but I had to drop the coat completely which I did. I recognized him from one of

the music shows, he was a local rapper. He went on about the money he had. He did some cocaine and drank at the same time. Soon his hour was over and Mike knocked on the door. My client gave Mike money for another hour. It seemed he wanted his money's worth on the second hour because he ordered me to take off my dress. I did and he looked at my body. At first I used to feel dirty but not so much anymore. We went to the bed and things started to heat up but fortunately the guy passed out before anything could happen. He

was still breathing. I guess the alcohol was too much for him. I put my dress and my coat back on waiting for the time he booked me to pass. There are clients who want no sexual favours but just want to talk. Those are my favourite and also those who get drunk until they pass out before anything happens, like my friend who is passed out. Mike does not care if we sleep with these people or not. As long as his money is not short. We don't get anything from the fees we make. He fears we will save and run. He says providing for us is enough. I called

Cathy and she said she is fine and will wait for me until I'm back. I then checked my bag for lipstick. A small folded paper fell out. I checked it and it had a number and the name Lakhawe written on it. I then remembered it's the lady from Cape Town. I smiled when I thought of her. The last time I used the bag was on that day so I never got to look at the picture of her missing loved one. I opened the paper and looked at the blurry picture but couldn't see. The light in the bathroom was better so I went with it there. I promised her I'd look at

it and after the way she treated me I owe her that. I held the picture up to the light and it was a cute baby girl. There is no way I can know her. I was about to fold the picture when I saw something. I held it up to the light again and realized the child had a black mark under her left foot. My heart started to beat faster because I have a similar one on the same spot. We never had any baby pictures so I do not know what I looked like as a baby. The child does look somewhat like me. The light skin, the big eyes and my top lip is

bigger than my bottom one and it seems this child on the picture has the same lips. I always hated my lips because most people have a small upper lip and a bigger bottom one. Mine looks like plastic surgery gone wrong. Soon Mike knocked on the door. I couldn't leave with him, not now. I searched in my client's wallet and found enough for another hour. I just stuck my arm out the door to give the money. I walked to the bathroom with my bag and locked it. I hoped my client would be out for another hour. I checked the back for

Lakhiwe's number. I took my phone out ready to call but got too afraid. I might be putting her life in danger. I sat on the seat and cried my eyes out. If it's me on the picture then that would mean Sophie and Mike were not my real parents. It would explain a lot. Could it be possible that non of us are theirs? I mean non of us got special treatment. We were all forced by threats to be prostitutes. Had some been theirs biologically I imagine they would have gotten special treatment. If we are not theirs then where did they get

us? Come to think of it none of us look alike, no resemblance at all. We never had extended family. Sophie and Mike only wanted us to say Mom and Dad in public. If I'm the girl in the picture than how did I end up with Sophie and Mike. Or maybe they are my biological parents and the people looking for me are their extended family. Maybe those people only have one picture the one in my hand and hoped Mike and Sophie would see and return home. My mind was filled with so many questions and I had no answer to any of them. I was so confused

and I knew the only way to know what is happening is by calling the Cape Town lady but I'm afraid of what Mike might do to her. I'm already worried about my younger sisters lives, I can't worry about hers too. I must have cried the hour away because Mike knocked again or he is stealing the client's time. I could not ask him anything. I couldn't ask if I was his daughter. I never questioned my paternity because I just thought I have sick, twisted parents who only saw us as means to make money.

Mike: "Must have been three hectic hours. You look like shit," he said while driving.

Blue: "Don't act like you don't know what these men ask of us, Mike," I said softly.

Mike: "If I didn't have you guys do this. We would end up on the streets. I care too much to allow that. I was given daughters so I saw an opportunity. Not like I ever touched any of you," he said. The sick thing is that a part of me believes him. It's said that kids raised by sick psychotic parents who abuses them never stop loving their parents, they

stop loving themselves and it's true but I also hated him. Had he not had guards around him, I'd have killed him a long time ago.

Blue: "Whatever. I'm done for the night and so is Cathy. You can beat the hell out of me, I don't care. Leave her alone, her client was more difficult tonight,"

Mike: "Well your client overpaid for the last hour. I'm happy so do as you please. Tomorrow we are going to Durban. The clients there love you. You might be old but they love you,"

I let him talk alone. I was just glad that we will have the rest of the night off. If I ask Mike, he will be suspicious and search me. He will find the picture, realize it might be me and we might go to another part of the continent again. I have a feeling that he does not want to be found, not even by his own family. I'm still afraid to call Lakhiwe. Mike checked our phones at night. I suspect he even has an IT guy to check our deleted messages and call details. We drove back to the place we were staying at. I just wanted to take a shower and hold

my sister for the night. Mike had bodyguards so he knew we wouldn't run. He got us a house to rent for our stay in the township. I went to our room and Cathy was not there. I'm sure she is taking a shower. I decided to wait for her to come out. The guard said she had been there for a while which was typical Cathy. She still tries to wash the dirt of her skin by taking extra hot showers but if only she knew that does not help. Our skins get clean but inside we remain feeling dirty. No shower can take away that feeling. I put the picture in my

bra for safe keeping. I called my other siblings and they are all okay. I went to the bathroom to check on Cat. When I opened the door I found my young sister fully clothed in a bathtub filled with red water, it was her blood. I screamed like a mad woman while crying. I went to her to try and take her out of the bath but she was not moving. Mike and the guard came to the bathroom and they wanted us to leave her. I threatened to scream my lungs out if they don't take her to hospital and the neighbors will hear it. They did not take any

chances. I might be older than the other girls but I had loyal clients who paid big money for my time so Mike would not risk losing me. They picked her up and put her in the car. We drove to hospital but Mike said we would leave her at the door. I once again made threats to scream and did not care if they killed me. He ordered the guard to put Cat outside the door and I scream until help comes out. They said they will stand at the entrance so I wouldn't escape but I didn't care. Cat was taken out of the car and I called out for help. The

car drove off to park elsewhere but the guard lurked close. A Porter came with a wheelchair and wheeled Cat in. Soon the hospital staff attended to her. I was a mess and the guard made sure I saw him close. I sat for a long while and a nurse came out to give her condolences. Cat did not die due to her cutting her wrists. She drowned to death when she lost consciousness due to loss of blood. I lost another sister. I did not even cry but asked to see her. They allowed me and once again that jerk made sure I knew he was around. I went into the

hospital room where Cat laid lifeless. I looked at her beautiful small face and cried. They covered her with a green sheet. I checked her wrists and saw the deep cuts on them. I started to shake because Bonggi, my sister who committed suicide was found by me. She hung in our bedroom roof when I found her. Seeing Cat like this brought back all those memories. I couldn't take it, I too wanted to die. I cried and cried until I had no more tears left. A nurse came in wanting Cat's details and saying the police are here to question me. I went

out and saw Mike's guard pretending to read a magazine. It was a female detective that came to question me and she was attentive though I know she knew I'm a prostitute. She took me to another room. I could see the guard panic and he signalled that he would slit my throat if I talked. I didn't care. I felt dead already. I knew I would end up like my sisters someday in this life we are living any day could be our last. We could either get killed by a client or anger Mike to a point of him killing us. I'm sure Mike and Sophie had some psychological

sickness. I'm not a parent but I wouldn't do such to my kids. It would have been better for Sophie to abort us than give us life only to raise us to be prostitutes and kill those who defy them. Unless we really are not theirs. I walked to the private room with the cop lady. She asked me questions but I kept quiet.

Blue: "Give me your phone, so I can make a call then I'll answer," I said.

Cop: "You are in no position to make special demands. We have opened a murder case for that

girl. I suspect it was not suicide and right now you are our main and only suspect,"

Blue: "I'm small fish compared to the shark I want to give you. I wouldn't kill my own sister, my own blood. Phone call or I keep quiet. Jail is a better alternative than the place I will be forced to return to," she looked at me for a long while.

She took out her phone and placed it on the bed. I took it and took Lakhiwe's number from my bra. It was late but I had to try. I know married people hardly

answer at night. I dialed the number and it rang.

Lakhiwe: "Hello," she answered in a sleepy voice. I was so happy to hear her voice. "Hello, anyone there?" she asked.

Blue: "Black Diamond it's me," I knew she would know who I am if I called her that.

Lakhiwe: "Hey, Blue. You in town?" I could hear she is smiling.

Blue: "Can you talk?"

Lakhiwe: "I'm studying but yeah I can. What's up? I'm so happy to hear from you," I actually smiled.

Blue: "Please tell me about the girl in the picture," I got straight to the point.

Lakhiwe: "Uhm wow okay...She is my husband's older sister...", she told me the entire story and I listened while crying. I think I'm who they are looking for.

I told her that I think I'm her. She told me to wait so she could go tell my brother. Just hearing I might have a brother is strange. I could hear her speak in riddles while explaining to her husband. He begged her to slow down but she failed. He finally

took the phone and asked who I am.

Blue: "I think I'm who you are looking for and I need your help. I'm in a very sticky situation and I need your help," I said while crying.

Liyema: "Uhm...okay give me your details quickly. We will be there as soon as we can," he spoke quickly. I gave the cop the phone and told her to tell him where I am. They said they are coming. After ending the call I told the cop I will need protection until they come and she agreed on condition

I give her the big fish I promised her. I first told her where my sisters said they were. She made calls and said she sent men to raid the brothel. I told her what car Mike is driving and gave her a description of him. I also told her about the guard outside. She made a call but I didn't listen to what she was saying. I couldn't get rid of the image of Cat and that dog has to pay if he killed her. She ended the call and said she has made arrangements to catch them. I knew Mike wouldn't just let this slide and go to jail. Her phone rang

and she got news that the guard outside was caught. Mike got away but she said she had road blocks so he will not be able to skip town. We sat there for an hour or so and I got news that Mike was arrested. Also that the brothel was raided where my sisters worked. They arrested some of the girls and guards that were there but the guards first put up a fight by shooting at police so some of them died and so did three of the girls. I cried because I thought my sisters could be one of them. Cat and I were the only ones who travelled

to meet clients in different towns amongst us sisters. The others were "kept safe" at a brothel in Port Elizabeth and Mike gave it's owner commission on the money the girls brought in. We are objects to him, our own father. He couldn't have a brothel because he feared being committed to one place. Cat and I and the other girls were booked on a phone call basis. At least he allowed us to call our sisters when we could. The cop took me to the police station where I gave her a full statement of what I know about Mike's operations. She promised

me I will be safe inside but I knew Mike could reach me anywhere. I just hope he will kill me only after I've met Lakhiwe's family. If I'm the baby, I want to look at them as they explain how I ended up with Mike and Sophie. I want to die knowing who I really am because I know I will die soon and I do not care, not anymore. I just want to know if I'm really Lulama or not. I want to die having known my identity. I do not want to die as Blue Diamond.

FIFTY FOUR

MRS E

When Liyema woke me up to tell me that he got a call that might lead us to Lulongke I felt both anxious and excited. Liyema did not say much more but I could sense he was not telling me the entire story. Could she perhaps have died? He booked a flight for the two of us to go to George and from there we will hire a car and drive to Mosselbay. Something tells me that we are on the right track this time. During the three week search we were unsuccessful. It was if no one Lulo knew watched TV or used social

media. Lungi showed me how many people shared his post and the picture but non knew her. Some called asking what they will get as reward should they tell us where she is but we knew those were chance takers. It has been three weeks of uncertainty and hell. Mlu has been calling once a week and I told him we are looking for our daughter. He did not seem too keen on helping but he gave us his well wishes. I can't believe he is still upset because I did not listen to him when he told me to have the abortion. Liyema and I arrived in

Mosselbay at about 6am in the morning. We were both tired from the endless searching and dead ends. When we arrived we drove straight to the police station where the Detective said we would find her. She said we must ask for Detective Hanase and no one else. She said she will make sure she is at the station when we arrive. That made me so scared. Was Lulo found dead? Why direct us to a police station or could she be a criminal? I felt my heart feel more pained because had my uncle not taken my baby she would not be in this situation, whatever

situation she is in that is. She perhaps would have been a young professional with a family of her own. We went to the constable who stood behind the counter and told him who we are looking for. He told us he was expecting us and led us to a room deeper in the police station. Liyema and I sat holding hands.

Zola: "Where the hell is this woman? Why make us sit and wait for her this long?" I said while looking at my watch.

Liyema: "It has only been ten minutes, Mma. She is on her way,"

he said softly. He was tired. I could hear in the way he spoke.

Zola: "I can not wait any longer, Ndoda. I want to know why we are here. Why did we get called the police station to come get here?. What is they found her killed?" I started to cry.

Liyema: "If that were the case than I would not have spoken to her last night. The woman that called is alive. I do not know why she called from here but we will find out soon. Please, you will make yourself sick with worry and right now I need you at your strongest. We do not know the condition she

is in. we might have to be strong for her," he said and kissed my hand. I knew he was right. A woman walked in and introduced her as Detective Hanase. Finally she came.

Zola: "Detective can we see her?"

Hanase: "You will soon, Mam. I have not slept a wink trying to protect her. She trusts no one but me at this moment. Lulama has been through a lot,"

Liyema: "Lulama? We are looking for Lulonke," he looked at me.

Zola: "They might have changed her name. When you think about

it, Lulama and Lulonke sound about the same. Why can't we see her now?"

Hanase: "Mam, if she is your daughter than she is involved with dangerous people. Mike has been wanted by the police for years for cases involving kidnapping, drugs and prostitution. I'm shocked that my team and I were able to get such a dangerous man but he does not work alone. If Lulama is your daughter then you should prepare yourself for a lot. She has been through things no woman should have been forced in to," I cried.

"She told me how Mike and his wife groomed her and her sisters to be prostitutes. She has been forced to sell her body since the age of 16 and never stopped until now that we got Mike. She had to see her younger sister hang on the bulks of the roof with a sheet around her neck. Just last night she had to witness another of her sisters in a bath filled with water and blood, she too died. If she is your daughter prepare yourself to meet a broken woman. There is plenty of difficult moments ahead. It seems Mike and his wife and their friends

stole these girls from their parents and trafficked them," I could not hear more. I cried until my nose bled once again. They had napkins brought for me to block the nose. Liyema was worried sick and I could see it weighed him down so much. They had to wait for me to collect myself. I heard Liyema and I know we needed to be strong for Lulo but I could not help it. My child was stolen only to be a sex worker when I could have given her a life of safety and security. I failed as a mother. I collected myself because the detective said

that she is ready to call Lulo in. Liyema remained strong and shed no tear. I wish I was as strong as him. We sat for a long while once again waiting. The detective returned with a young lady who was wearing a long white coat and was barefoot. I wanted to cry once again but I had to stay strong. It's her, she has her grandmother's lips. Liyema looked at me and smiled. I think he saw our features on her face too. She just looked at us without saying a word. She had no make up on and her skin glowed. She gets that from me. Her big eyes were even

bigger as she looked at us. The three of us just stood looking at each other. She sat down and so did we. Once again we just stared at her and she at us. I could not take it anymore. I went under the table, grabbed her left foot to check for her birthmark. She had the birthmark I remembered her by. She is mine. I kissed her feet several times while crying. They were cold and dirty but I did not care. I had never kissed anyone's feet before. I got up and found her hand over her face with soft sobbing coming from her. Liyema stood to go to her side

but she jumped up to make distance between the two of them. I'm guessing after the life she lived, she no longer trusted men. I tried to get closer but she went further into the corner.

Liyema took my hand and told me to give her space.

Lulo: "Where is Laksiwe?" she asked while looking at Hanase. The detective looked at us.

Liyema: "She has an important test to write today so she could not come. I'm Liyema, her husband. You spoke to me over the phone last night,"

Lulo: "Detective, I want her. I want Lakhiwe. I do not trust any of these people but I trust her please,"

Zola: "Liyema," I looked at him.

Liyema: "Uhm okay...I can not tell her that now because she is going to write in two hours and this test is important. Is it possible for me to call after the test and book a flight out for her as soon as possible?. It's Friday so I think she will be able to make it," he said softly.

Lulo: "I will wait for her. Please take me back to my cell,"

Zola: "Cell?" I asked the detective.

Detective: "She is alone and safe. I will not go, I promise she will be safe,"

Zola: "Please don't go back in Lulonga," I pleaded.

Lulo: "Please take me back," she pleaded.

She made eye contact with both Liyema and I until the door behind her closed. I felt numb.

Liyema and I sat down. I felt so empty. I felt responsible for my child having had a tough life.

Zola: "Can't you call..."

Liyema: "Mma, please do not ask me to ask Lakhawe to miss her test. Don't you think I'm anxious to do that? This is not easy on me either please," he said in a shaking voice and I realized that I was asking a lot of him.

Lakhawe has been studying for this test since last week and it is important. We sat and waited. Neither of us has had any food and I think neither of us have an appetite. The detective returned and I told her I want to see this Mike because I do not remember my uncle going by that name. She first declined saying that he got

denied bail and will be transferred to prison soon. They also hoped Mike would turn state witness but I knew that will not happen. If he could sell his own niece's daughter then he has no conscience. I had to beg and plead. She finally agreed to let me. Liyema wanted to come with me but I said I will be okay. I might have been a weakling when I saw Lulo but this Mike will not see that. I waited and a man was brought in and his hands were handcuffed. I was sixteen when I last saw my uncle, I remember him. He looked old but it is him.

The officer did not allow us privacy for my safety. Had I been left alone with him it's Mike's safety they would have had to be concerned about not mine. I killed several police informants in my time. To kill a sick bastard will feel like a joy ride to me.

Mike: "Nunu?", he said with a smile. He used to call me that when I was a child. I reached over the table and dug my nails in his skin and scratched him until he bled. The officer held me back and said it was time for me to go. My bastard uncle said it was okay, I can stay. The officer warned

me. I looked and my nails and it had his blood on them. I already have HIV so getting his blood on me was nothing. I sat down across from him. I wanted to torture him and then pour petrol on him and watch him scream and burn to death.

Zola: "Why did you take her?" I looked at him.

Mike: "You did not want her and Makhulu was struggling,"

Zola: "Do not talk nonsense. I sent her money by post office every chance I could. I provided for my child!" I shouted.

Mike: "Oh was that money from you? She never got it because I collected it so I'm not lying when I say Khulu was struggling," he said quietly. I wanted to strangle him to death but the police will take me out and I want to ask him more questions.

Zola: "You will burn in hell, Phakamile. You took my child without my permission to sell her so you can have money. How sick can you get?"

Mike: "I gave her a home when you left her to starve. They never went hungry, ask her."

Zola: "I will kill you,"

Mike: "Oh come on, Nunu. You don't have a killer bone in you. Even if you did kill me. Do you really think I'm the head of the snake? Do you think I run this operation? I'm just a part of the snake's body. Even if you kill me someone will get to the girls. If you can get to the head and crush it, only then will your baby be protected. Good luck in killing me too," he said in a whisper.

Zola: "I would have been a fool to think you were the head of the operation but if it takes killing parts of the snakes until I get

to crush its head then so be it.
Kill you I will, I promise,"

He smiled and I looked at him. I saw a tattoo on his wrist of a capital G and it had a star on the bottom. I have seen it before but I can not remember where. Or could I have seen it on him years ago? But he did not have tattoos back then, no visible ones. I told the police that I am ready to go back to my son. I will not involve Liyema in the dirty part of this. When I got out I found Liyema holding food and coffee. I appreciated it but I was in no mood to eat. I told him I needed

time alone and went outside for some air. My phone rang and I knew it was Mlu.

Zola: "I found our child. We are in Mosselbay to get her," I said without greeting him.

Mlu: "Will you take her home?"

Zola: "What part of we are here to take her did you not get?"

Where else would I take her but home," I shouted.

Mlu: "Do a DNA Test first. The last thing we need is the wrong person pose as her,"

Zola: "Only the parent who never met her would say so. I know her.

Tell me what does a tattoo of a Capital G and a star mean?,"

Mlu: "I'm no tattoo analyst. Most tattoos have no meaning,"

Zola: "Dammit, Mlungisi! For once just be present in matters concerning your children. I think the man who kidnapped Lulo is part of a gang or something.

Gangs like to mark their own so please just...You know what?

Never mind. I will carry our children and their issues alone as I've done for years. I have to go,"

Mlu: "Don't hang up, Zozo please. I'm sorry, I'm just frustrated by being here and not at home," he said. He hardly used those common words that made one a decent person such as please and sorry so I did not hang up. "Uhm a capital G with a star? I've worked on many gang related cases, consultant on such cases too and even had to represent some so I have seen a few markings. A capital G?" he sounded like he was deep in thought.

Zola: "With a star at the bottom," I added.

Mlu: "I do not recall su...wait is the G bold or not?"

Zola: "It's not bold. It looked like italic font and the star is colored red, a dark red,"

Mlu: "Shit!" he said. "I think I know the gang, not personally though. A friend of mine wanted my opinion on a case not so long ago. He works on human trafficking cases to bring down such syndicates. These are dangerous people, Zola,"

Zola: "Where can I get this friend of yours?"

Mlu: "You are just a house executive. There is no way you will be able to bring down such powerful people,"

Zola: "For our child, I will die trying. She deserves that much. If I get this right I save more young girls. But I will need this friend's details so I can contact him,"

Mlu: "I can not risk you dying for a child we never knew,"

Zola: "You never wanted her so why am I not surprised to hear that from you. I will find this man with or without your help,"

Mlu: "David Carr, that is his name. I have to go and please be careful. I will call on our usual time next week. Be alive when I do," he hung up.

I immediately searched the name but did not get much of him online. A text came through and it had a phone number and "be careful" written on it. I called the number and when the person on the other line said "David Carr" I almost jumped up and down like a child. It seems Mlu wants me to help our child after all. I told Mr Carr who I am and what I needed from him. I had his full

attention because he apparently had been trying for a long time to pin down the person leading the sex trading my uncle works for. Mr Carr says he has brought down many human trafficking bosses but has been unsuccessful with the one from this gang because they operate with casinos, hotels, police and even some hospitals. I asked if we could meet and luckily he was in Cape Town. I told him I will be back as soon as I can. I still have a long way to go but at least there is progress. I went in and asked about Mike's transfer to jail. One would be surprised

what people would do for money. I had to make the time while we waited for Lakhawe to get here useful. I could not get the times of his times and means of transportation but I did get which prison he was going to. I made a call to my friend again and asked him if he knew people on the inside there and by luck, he did. Both Mike and his guards will be silenced by later tonight. I know killing him will not bring his boss to my front door but it will get the leader's attention. When two of his men have been killed he will go out and investigate

because the killings are a threat to the business, it brings attention to it. Killing Mike is like using him as bait to lure out the big boss. I have a feeling Mike made him good money so he will want to come out and find out who killed his cash cow. My wish was to watch Mike die but I guess I will not have the pleasure. No use keeping him alive when I know he will not help the cops in any way. Hours went by and Liyema told me that Lakhiwe has done writing and will be on a flight in an hour. We were lucky to get her the next available flight

our of Cape town. Liyema said we should drive to George to go meet her at the airport but I told him I will stay just in case Lulo wants to see us. He asked me to eat, kissed my cheek, asked the detective to look after me and went to George. I sat hoping that Lulo will be brought back out so I can talk to her alone. I need to explain myself. I do not understand why she wants to see Lakhiwe and not her mother. Lakhiwe knows nothing about this case but what I have told her. I sat hoping that she will

somehow trust me as much as she seems to trust Lakhiwe.

LAKHIWE

When I switched my phone on after the very difficult test I wrote I saw that Liyema had called. I called him back. He told me that I need to go to Mosselbay because Blue refuses to talk to anyone but me. I was shocked to say the least. Liyema said he arranged for the nanny to stay the weekend and his aunt will also stay over to look after the boys. Liyema's aunt has no children and her husband died a long time ago, so she could help. I

still do not like leaving my babies behind but I had to try help Blue because Liyema said the situation is bad but did not go into detail. He promised to be at the airport when I arrive. I packed some clothes in a small bag. Makazi arrived and so did sis Pat. Luckily Makazi can drive so she will pick my babies up later on. I was planning to take them to the park this weekend since I have been so busy with varsity lately but we will have to do it some other time. I gave Makazi a list of what to do and what not and she told me she knew the boys

well since they spend the weekend at her house when we went to Durban. She was right, she does. My taxi arrived while I was packing my shoes but I had to leave the rest and go with what I had. I'm hoping to be back by Sunday. I made it on time for my flight and boarded. I was wondering why Blue wanted me when her mother and brother are there with her. The flight was not long at all. I've never been to George but have heard they have nice travel destination, the Garden Route looks beautiful on travel catalogs. We have to come

when matters are good. I found my tall handsome man waiting for me looking exhausted. I hugged him and he held on a little longer. I guess things are bad. I kissed him and we made our way to the car. He gave me an update on Blue saying her name is Lulama. He said Mma is convinced its her and that she does look like some family members. I knew that. He told me what happened to her and I was shattered, just shattered to the core. I felt weak and numb. I had difficulty getting over abuse, still do but I can not imagine how difficult

healing will be for Lulama. I would have committed suicide much like her sisters too, well I attempted it once but failed and their situation was ten times worse.

We got to Mosselbay in less than an hour from George. Liyema was driving a bit too fast. We drove to the police station and Liyema held my hand leading me inside. I felt scared for some reason. Mma came to hug me when she saw us. She also held on a bit longer. Mma went to tell the detective that I've arrived. The three of us went to a room that had a table and chairs with an officer at the

door. My heart was beating a bit too fast. Liyema kissed my forehead. I think he sees just how terrified I am feeling. The door flung open and the detective walked in with Blue, I mean Lulama. She scanned the faces in front of her and when she saw mine tears fell down her cheeks and she ran to hug me. I wrapped my arms around her too. I could see the pain in Mma's eyes. I guess a part of her wishes that it could be her Lulama ran to. I would had I been Mma. Lulama is much taller than me so I had my arms around

her waist. I could not help but cry too. If her grip were to tighten more, she would crush my shoulders that was how she clung to me. I waited for her to be the one to break the hug. She looked at me and I wiped her tears off with my hands. She looked broken, defeated. Her tears said it, her eyes said it, her face said it and her entire body showed that it carried a broken woman.

Blue: "Hi," she said softly. I smiled.

Lakhiwe: "Hi," I looked at her. She was without make up. She had a lot of make up on when I

met her and she was hiding such a beautiful face underneath that make up.

Blue: "Thank you for coming. How was the test?" she asked. Is this woman serious? She is in this situation but has time to ask about my test?.

Lakhiwe: "I think I got at least 50%, enough to pass," we both laughed softly.

Mma: "Lakhiwe won't you introduce us to your friend please, my baby?" she said sounding unsure of her words.

Lakhiwe: "I'm sorry, Mma. Uhm this is Blue,"

Blue: "Lulama," she corrected me.

Mrs E: "Lulonke," she corrected Lulama. What do we call her now?

Lakhiwe: "Yes. Baby, Lulama was the person I told you came to my rescue when that Andile guy was following me to return my phone. We had coffee so I could say thanks. I gave her the picture of Lulonke and she promised to look at. After three weeks of not hearing from her I thought she did not know Lulo but it turns out she might be the person we were

looking for. Last night she called to tell us that as you know," I said while looking at the family and I turned to face Lulama who held my hand. "Lulama, this is my husband, Liyema and his mother, my mother in law and possibly your mother too," Lulama looked at Mma for a long while. It was a cold look not one of admiration. Lulama: "Why did you give me away? Did you cheat on your husband and get pregnant with me? So you had to hide me from him?", she asked Mma.

Mma: "Please can we sit while talking about this?"

Lulama: "I've been sitting in the cell since last night. I will stand,"
Mma nodded. I'm glad Liyema did not come to Mma's defense. I think Lulama does not want answers from me nor him but from Mma.

Mma: "I never gave you away. You are not my lover's child because I never had any. You and Liyema have the same father,"

Lulama: "So what makes him so special? Why is he next to you and I'm in jail?", she asked with attitude.

Mma: "Because the circumstances were different when I had you compared to when I had him...," Lulama wanted to say something. "Please just let me explain first then you can talk. Just listen for now, please," Mma pleaded.

Lulama closed her mouth and looked at Mma. Mma started to speak. She told Lulama the story just as she had told it to us but this time with more emotion. She was telling the story to the victim in all of this so she had to be soft and show how remorseful she is. Lulama held onto my hand for dear life. I feel like she sees

me as her "safe place" as I see Liyema. When you go through trauma you need a safe place. Sometimes its a town, a building, something as simple as a blanket but in some cases a safe place is another human being. If she feels that way about me though I can not help her much, I will be there when she needs me. Even if we find that she is not Lulongke, I will be a friend to her. She deserves sunshine in her life for once. But now that her make up is off, I see Mma, the resemblance between them is scary. She got Liyema's height for sure or

Liyema got her height since she is older. Mma finally concluded her story and then there was silence.

Lulama: "I don't understand why you did not choose me from the beginning," she said softly.

Mma: "Me not aborting you, was my way of choosing you. I loved you from the second I knew you were growing inside of me. I was wrong, my baby. Your father was wrong too. We are sorry,"

Lulama: "Will your sorry erase the years of trauma I experienced by being a sex slave? Will your sorry erase the memory engraved in my

mind of seeing my sister dangling lifeless in our bedroom roof? Will it erase the pain I felt when my older sisters got murdered? Will it erase the image of my sister in water mixed with her own blood with open wrists? Will it erase the fear I'm currently feeling as I wait to hear if my other sisters were shot in the raid last night?. Will your sorry erase all of that?" she said with no tear just anger, lots of anger. Liyema could not help but shed tears, no brother wants to hear his sister speak like that. Mma held her shaking hands over her mouth

while crying. She knows that her sorry will not erase all the pain but she also had to accept that sorry is all she can give Lulama at the moment.

There is a lot of bad emotions in the room. None of us could speak. Lulama looked at Mma like Mma was the scum of the earth.

Liyema stood feeling too emotional to even speak and I had nothing to say. I just brushed Lulama's hand softly. I do not blame her for not seeing things from Mma's point of view. She got the worst end of the stick. She is angry and sad. She asked Mma and Liyema

to leave the room. Mma pleaded with her not to shut her out. My poor mother in law even went on her knees. Mma is not a person that begs so seeing her beg was not easy at all. Liyema finally managed to carry her out of the room crying. There was too much sadness in this place. It weighed my soul down. I just wished I could sprinkle happy dust on people like the cartoons on TV do with ease but we are living in real life not some illusion. We will have to create that happy dust by seeking healing and I have a

feeling we have a very long way to go.

LULAMA

If I was to open up to this family I needed the person I dealt with from the beginning to be with them. When I saw Lakiwe was not with them this morning I closed up. I do not know but I just wanted her there. I can't believe that she came so soon. My brother is one lucky man to have a wife who takes his family's shit like this. I heard this woman's reasons for leaving me but I just could not process them. I did not

understand them. I did not understand why she chose a man over me. If I was not important to her then, then why the hell would I be now? I wish she bloody well went ahead with that abortion. I wished I was never born so many times and I'm angry at her for not listening to her damn man when he told her to abort me,. It was like he knew how my life would end up and tried to save me from the pain by preventing my existence. I'm angry at the lot of them, siblings included. Maybe had Lakiwe been their daughter, I would have been

angry at her too but she was an outsider, like me.

Lakhiwe: "So what will happen now?" she looked at me.

Lulama: "Aren't you going to try and convince to see what a good woman your mother inlaw is?" I asked sarcastically.

Lakhiwe: "She has her faults but she is a good woman. Will I waste my time trying to convince you after all that happened?, No. I just want to know how you want me to help?" she sat down. She is strange but I like it.

Lulama: "I don't know. There is nothing you can do. I just wanted you here I guess," I said softly.

Lakhiwe: "Okay, so tell me about your sisters. How many are there? My sister hates me, like hates my guts," she said. I really thought she was going to force me to talk about deep stuff like most have so far but no..

Lulama: "We were 12. it was my older sisters Mbali, Sam, then there was me and the younger ones. My sisters loved me and those who are alive still love me. We are close and love each other. We had cat fights obviously but I

would go to war for them. Why does your sister hate you? Are you a bitch when you reveal your true colours?", she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "Aren't we all when our buttons get pushed too much? No, I put her mom in jail," her confession shocked me. Was it a confession? "Her mother is my stepmother so she is my half sister. The woman abused me until I had no choice but to run from home. Recently when I had my lobola negotiations, I had to go back home. Only to find that she had sold me to the guy who I thought I was willingly running

away from home with," she said softly. So she got trafficked to?

Lulama: "So you are a victim of human trafficking just like me?", I asked softly.

Lakhiwe: "I guess so but our situations were very different. I could never compare them. Plus Mma never sold you,"

Lulama: "Did the man she sold you to treat you right?"

Lakhiwe: "No, he used to beat the hell out of me,"

Lulama: "Then don't dilute your pain just because you feel mine was greater. We both knew

trauma from a young age in the hands of people who were suppose to protect us. Like you I also did not know I was trafficked because I thought they were my parents,"

Lakhiwe: "I hear you and you have a point,"

Lulama: "People like that will never understand, people like your family. Its easy for them to say sorry and use all these fancy words but they were not there. They were not there when your stepmother abused you, they were not there when I was made a sex slave, they were not there

when your ex hit you, they were not there when my clients and Mike hit me. We lived life not knowing if tomorrow would be our last. Not knowing if we were going to die in those men's hands. They do not understand," I looked at her with tears rolling down my cheek.

Lakhiwe: "I agree with you fully there. Liyema is there for me when it all gets too much but he can not erase the bad memories that trigger the bad days but I know if he could, he would. He was not there when it happened but

he is here now and I appreciate his presence in my life so much,"

Lulama: "At least you have him. I have no one. I don't even know if my sisters are still alive," I looked down she held my hand.

Lakhiwe: "You have an entire family now too,"

Lulama: "They are not my family," I said and she just nodded slowly.

Lakhiwe: "The only way to know is if you agree to the DNA test,"

Lulama: "Even if the results are positive, they still will not be my family," Hanase opened the door.

Hanase: "I just got word from my colleagues in PE. Your sisters are all still alive. All the girls were moved to a safe house until we can find their real families. You will be put in a safe house too since you know so much about Mike's business and his business partners. I'm arranging that as we speak. You will be safe until this blows over,"

Lulama: "Do what you must, detective. I'm a dead woman walking anyways so it really does not make a difference where I die. If Mike does not find a way to do it himself, then his friends

will and my sisters are as good as dead too. Just reunite us before that please,"

Hanase: "They are already at the safe house. You will be kept in a different one," she said.

Lulama: "Okay," Hanase left again.

Lakhiwe: "Stop saying you will die,"

Lulama: "I will not die, I'm dead. I know Mike works with other people. His network became too strong when he came to South Africa so he must have had help. Maybe they saw he had us girls

already and worked with him. Even that officer at the door might be one of them. Hell even the detective. I have accepted that I am a dead woman walking. I wished I could see the girls but it's okay. I will see them in hell,"

Lakhiwe: "Stop saying that. You won't die and you won't go to hell," she shouted.

Lulama: "I was not selling muffins, Lakhiwe, I was selling my body. Heaven has no place for people like me,"

Lakhiwe: "You did not do it out of free will, you had no choice. You can

not condemn yourself because of that. Please just talk to your brot...I mean Liyema and Mma. Maybe we can come up with a plan,"

Lulama: "Are they hardcore criminals with friends in dangerous syndicates?," she shook her head. "Then they can not help,"

Lakhiwe: "How will you know if you do not try them?,"

Lulama: "I will be putting your man in shit, Lakhiwe. Shit that might make you a young widow,"

Lakhiwe: "I know," she said softly. She thought of that and the thought scared her. "My husband is a smart man though," she added. Is she kidding me? I don't need smart man but damn hardcore thug.

I did not argue with her. I allowed her to let those people in. I do look like the woman but nothing like the guy. He must look like his daddy. The woman sat down and her son and Lakhiwe stood. I do not know what to say to these people.

Liyema: "We will not hurt you, Lulama. We just want to help,"

Lulama: "A man who I once thought was my father hurt me, what makes you think I will trust a man I met five minutes ago?" I looked at him.

Liyema: "Bceuase I'm not the man who stole you. I'm your brother, we share the same DNA,"

Lulama: "Hmm okay, brother," I said sarcastically. "I don't know why your wife called you in. maybe she can tell us all?" I looked at Lakhiwe,"

Lakhiwe: "well they will put her in a safe house soon. Her sisters are

there already. I don't know what I thought we could do," she looked at me with a frown on her forehead.

Mrs E: "A safe house is like dropping you off at Mike's boss's doorstep. I can not allow that. You will stay with me and I will hire security even if it bankrupts me. I will put a stop to this," I laughed loudly.

Lulama: "For all I know you will do the bloody same thing to me,"

Mrs E: "I want to put the people who did this to you away," she looked at me.

Liyema: "What do you mean?"

Mrs E: "I will tell you soon but for now let us just focus on getting her to Cape Town. Your father put me in touch with someone who can help me,"

Lulama: "I would rather die than go with you people, die, die, die. Plus your precious family will be at risk. Do you want to risk that?". My "mother" looked at her son. I knew they won't jump through fire hoops for me. "See?", I added.

Liyema: "I'll arrange for the boys and Lakhawe to go to Peddie as

soon as possible," he said while looking at his wife.

Lakhiwe: "What?" I'm writing exams, Liyema, no," she said.

Liyema: "Lala, please," he pleaded. They actually look cute together.

Lakhiwe: "Arrange for the boys to go. I'm not going to repeat a year because of some thugs. One already wasted my time before so, no," she said with attitude.

Lulama: "Do not break your damn backs bending over backwards for me. I've always been tough. I can look after myself. Go home and be a happy family again."

Liyema: "You are a part of that family and I promised my grandmother I would bring you home. I don't break promises I made to my grandmother," he pointed at me. Who does he think he is pointing at me?

Lulama: "Get your dirty finger out my face. Pointing dry fingers at me. Lakiwe get your man hand cream please,"

Lakiwe: "I don't know if you two are having your first sibling bickering but if so do it another time please", she looked at us.

Mma: "Liyema get the boys out of Cape town now. Have Pat take them to Peddie. Lakiwe tell your grandparents to prepare for four cute storms. You, I will take you to Cape Town and I will keep you safer than any law officer could. I failed once but I'm prepared now," she ordered.

Lulama: "I want a DNA test first,"

Mrs E: "Cape Town has labs too. I'll go arrange with the detective and arrange men for the house. My own men.

Liyema: "I'll arrange flights for the boys and Pat,"

Mrs E: "Don't worry. I will pay and for Pat's time too. She only needs to drop them off and return. We will get them when everything is done,"

These people took control of my life like I had no say. I just saw them make arrangements for me and they were not asking me, they were telling me. I don't know how I feel about this. A part of me feels warmed by the fact that people are willing to take risks for me. I'm glad the babies will be far from me, they

would be the easiest targets. Liyema made his arrangements and his mom hers. I guess I'm going to Cape town. I could see Lakhawe was not happy with being apart from her kids. I wish she was done with exam and went with them.

Detective: "So are you really going to risk going with these people? I mean no one knows the location of our safehouse but special members of the police force," she said.

Mma: "But we do not know if all those members are clean. I'm not

taking those chances with my child's life,"

Detective: "Do you trust these people? I have kept you safe all this time,"

Lulama: "And I'm grateful but she is right. I know Mike had police friends. That is why the girls and I never remained in custody long on those rare moments when we would get arrested. I might be going into a Lions den going with them but something tells me that they are the safer horse to bet on,"

Detective: "Okay but we will alert the police there that you are coming,"

Mrs E: "Don't tell me that she is going to be arrested as soon as we land,"

Detective: "No, but she will have to testify against Mike when the time comes. She is not under arrest,"

Lulama: "What about Cathrine?"

Detective: "I meant to tell you. My team and I sent her picture to all police stations in South Africa since we now know none of you are Mike's. A detective in Soweto

called me earlier on. We found Cat's family. Her real name is Lerato Maakwe. She went missing when she had just turned two years old. Her case had gone cold since she could not be found but her mother was happy to hear we found her even when she heard she was dead, the closure she will find from burying her child is enough for now. It seems it was suicide. We inspected the place and there was no sign that she struggled or was murdered. Her face sank deeper into the water when she lost consciousness causing her to drown. I'm sorry.

Mrs Elephant if this is your daughter, thank God for finding her alive. Many mothers will learn that their daughters have died. We will catch these bastards because Mike said it does not end with him. We have sent out the pictures of other girls too. Imani your youngest sister, her parents are alive and we told them that she will be released when we are sure they are in no danger. It seems families have been looking for their daughters for years. You going against Mike made that possible. You should be proud of yourself, Lulama. I will prove to

you that our safehouses are safe when the other girls get released into their families care. I hate men who think women are objects so we will bring them down," she sounded determined to shut these men down indeed.

Lulama: "Thank you," I said softly.

Wow so Imani found her family too? My heart breaks for Ca...Lerato's family. Imagine finding out your long lost daughter is found but unfortunetly she died a few hours ago. I know I won't be able to go to the funeral but I will go to

her grave to put lavender flowers, her favourite.

After listening to the detective I realized that none of the families of the girls were to blame for them being kidnapped, not even my own one. This woman did not leave me in the care of her granny for me to be stolen. That was all Mike and Sophie. I decided to drop my defences a bit with them.

They want to help and honestly I don't really want to die. If I did I would have killed myself a lot time ago. I do not know why I'm in love with living after I lived a life of hell but it is what it is.

Death did not look as appealing to me as it did to Cat and Bongji, I want to live. I just do not want to live as a sex worker anymore. I do not want to live in danger. I don't know what will happen next. I might lose these people to death because they chose to help me and they know it but they just do not care. What's important to them is that I be safe at last. I just sat crying silently alone because no one has wanted to risk their lives trying to protect me. The woman, my mother wanted to hug me but I did not allow her. Lakhiwe tried her luck and I did

not even protest. This woman must have some magic. She makes my defences so weak. She makes me want to open up my chest so she could see what's inside. I think now that I know her story, I'm more attached to her. We have almost been through the same things. She might think her pain was less painful but no pain is better. I look at her and I feel hopeful. To me, if she could dust herself after life dealt her so much pain at a young age, it meant there is hope for me. Maybe I want to be close to her now more than before

because I want her to teach me to heal as she has. I hear she has had bad and dark days but I can see she has healed. I want to heal and I want her to show me how. I do not want to be close to my brother. The only knowledge I have of a family man is Mike and he treated us like trash. How do I know if Liyema is not some bastard too? And as for my mother I do not know. I do not know how I feel about her completely but I am angry at her for sure. I think they will need to be patient with me while I study them. I assume they are rich too which makes me

more angry because I was suppose to have nice life problems just as I'm sure they have. The only family member I trust for now is Lakhiwe. I do not know what Cape Town has in store for me but I imagine danger and perhaps even bloodshed. I hope if blood is shed, it's mine and not any of theirs. I looked up at my stubborn sister in law who chose books over her own life and managed to smile. If we all come out of this alive, could she teach me how to heal?

FIFTY-FIVE

MRS E

I got news that Mike got killed within the first night of his time in jail. My children think that his bosses did it to stop him from talking. I don't want them to know me as a killer so I will let them believe that is what happened. I also know that the boss of the gang is panicking wherever he or she is. I can't say it's a man because woman do cruel things to other women. So I wouldn't be surprised if it's a woman with kids of her own who gets rich by selling other women's daughters. I've arranged for

security at the house and it has not been easy. Lulo refuses to have anything associated with me. It breaks my heart but I know forcing matters will make things worse. I've met with Mr Carr at very private places. Liyema and Lakhiwe are kind enough to actually come over to stay with Lulo when I have to go out. I've been forced to get myself a gun. So far there has been no action. None of us have seen anyone following us. I don't think these people know that Lulo is with us. I suspect they think she's at a police safehouse

and are trying to locate her there. I hope her sisters will be safe. Her not being able to contact them is eating at her heart. I know because I overheard her tell Lakhawe. So far that is the only person she wants anything to do with.

Lungile has not come to see his sister in the days we have been back. I told Liyema to give him time. I went to meet Carr once again. He said he might have a plan since none of us have come with anything solid and we know we don't have much time.

Carr: "I have a plan to get to the boss. It's not full proof but it might get us the big fish," he looked at me. I had a feeling that I will not like what this man has to say.

Zola: "I'm listening," I looked into his eyes.

Carr: "We both know Mike got killed before he could tell them about your involvement because you and your family would have been killed by now,"

Zola: "Don't be so sure about that,"

Carr: "Okay but them not knowing that you are involved and that one of the girls are at your place could work at our advantage but we need to move quick. We use the girl as bait," he said quickly.

Zola: "No, over my dead body," I shouted. I felt like slapping him. I did not tell him Lulo is my child so I don't think he realizes how much he is asking of me.

Carr: "If we are not in control then they will indeed go over your dead body to get to her. They will eliminate all of you. I'm not talking about a small gang that robs houses here,"

Zola: "Don't you think I bloody know that? How sure are we that the person in charge will be the one to fall into the trap?" I asked. I can't risk my daughter.

Carr: "Well I've been following cases involving these people for years. I have sources who have dealt with this guy. He might be hard to pin down but when you have business for him, he prefers to meet personally with you,"

Zola: "How would you know?," I looked at him.

Carr: "Please your question makes it sound like you think I'm one of

them. Strip me naked and you won't find any tattoo. When you work on human trafficking cases you work with people who go undercover a lot. None of my people were able to get close to the boss but they have heard that this guy likes to conclude deal himself. We now have a perfect opportunity to lure him out of the hole he is in. The girl at your place was Mike's number one girl. Mike is dead. If she gets in touch with this guy and tells him that she wants to take over Mike's operations, I'm 95% sure he will

want to meet her," he said sounding sure.

Zola: "And put her life in danger,"

Carr: "It already is. The boss is looking for them as we speak.

Once he hears she got away and has knowledge of where the others are, she will make him sit up and listen.

Zola: "She doesn't know where they are,"

Carr: "He doesn't know that. Like I've said, we are in control but only for so long. He could find out she's at your house soon and if we don't act now, body bags will come

out of that house," he looked at me. I don't want anyone to die.

Zola: "I have to think about it,"

Carr: "Make the call now and go run the plan by her. Time is what we do not have,"

Zola : "This girl is still fragile. Where will we even get these girls? He might fall for the trap but he will check out the coast first and if Lulo shows up without girls as she promised, she is dead,"

Carr: "Like I've said. I know very good professional undercover officials who have helped me bring down such pigs for years. Some

are female, beautiful ones so she will arrive with the girls as promised,"

Zola: "How would we even contact this guy?"

Carr: "Leave that to me. Mrs Elephant my track record speaks for itself. You came to me for help, so you have to trust me with this. This is the only way," I sat feeling anxious. I don't trust easily but Carr's energy does not indicate evil but one can never be careful. He's right, he has brought down many of these kinds of people. I'm in no position

to do this on my own. Good thing I silenced Mike before he could sing to his boss about me. It seems Detective Hanase has kept this secret well. But Carr is right, they will find out where Lulo really is soon and they will kill anyone in their way of getting to her. I agreed with Carr but I will first have to talk to Lulo. How do you tell your own child that she is going to be used as bait and might die?. Carr showed me the picture his undercover people could get of the person, it's a man. This man has been following this gang for years now.

He is itching to catch them. He has a lot of information on them but they protect their king well so no one could get his location.

Carr explained the plan more and I will agree only when Lulo does too. I went back home to run the plan by her. She hates my guts so I hope she will listen. I found her sitting in her room behind a locked door, she does that a lot. I knocked on the door and announced who I am. There was silence at first but I pleaded until she opened. She had been crying. She went to sit on the bed with her back turned on me. I sat on the

opposite side because she does not want me close to her.

Zola: "I know why no one has made threats yet, they don't know you are here. We think they are trying to locate the police safehouse you might be in. They don't know you are here but it's only a matter of time," I said softly.

Lulo: "And you want me to go right? I was waiting for this moment. I'll go," she said with attitude.

Zola: "I never want you to go again. I want you here with me. I love you, Lulo,"

Lulo: "LULAMA"

Zola: "Yes. So the man I said I'm working with came up with a plan to catch them," she turned to face me.

Lulo: "And you trust him?"

Zola: "Right now he is the only one who can help us. He has the means to do it. I want you to be free, Lulo. Even if that means you move to another city but as long as you won't ever have to look over your shoulder again,"

Lulo: "Why are you doing this?"

Zola: "I'm your mother. You might not believe that I love you all equally but it's true and I could kill for all of you," I said. If only she knew, I already have killed for her but she doesn't need to carry that guilt, because I don't feel guilty for killing Mike and his friend.

Lulo: "What's the plan?" she turned her back on me again. I wanted to hug her so much. She has not allowed me to touch her during the time we've reconnected.

Zola : "I hate this plan so much. I don't want to go ahead with it but here goes,"

I told her what Carr wanted her to do. Lulo does not trust her own family. I doubt that she will trust Carr whom she has never even met. I finished explaining the plan to her and she kept quiet. She was not going to do it, I will have to think of something else. Perhaps I'd have to go live in another country with her.

Maybe wherever Mlu is, we can go too. I'd hate to leave my boys but they have had me all their lives. If hiding in another country

with their sister will keep her safe then I'm going to do it. She needs to know I choose her too. I did not beg her to accept Carr's plan. I sat and waited for her answer.

Lulo: "I'll do it," she said softly after a few minutes.

Zola: "Wow okay, let me go tell Carr now,"

Lulo: "I'm not doing this for you. I'm not doing it for that man whose helping you. I'm doing this for my sisters. For years I've promised to save them. If this might help, I'll do it,"

Zola: "I'm glad you are not doing it for us. Let me go call Carr. Let's get the ball rolling,"

I walked out her room and called Mr Carr. He was happy to hear that she is on board and said he will arrange everything on his side and send someone from his team to come give Lulo a clear run down on what she must do. I told Lulo and she just nodded. I told Carr I'll go with his cop buddies but he said I'm not qualified for such a job. I called Liyema because he would hate to be kept in the dark. He has not been letting his wife out of his sight. He drops her off

and picks her up from varsity.
I'm hoping for this plan to work.

LULAMA

To put my own life at risk to possibly save my sisters is nothing to think about. Soon these people will know which safehouse they are in and kill them. They will know where I am and kill these people I live with and me. I can't take another loss. I don't feel attached to these people but I don't want them to die. I've been holding myself prisoner in the bedroom because my heart is broken. It's in so many pieces that I doubt I'll be able to put

them together. If I die these people will be safe. After a while Zola came to ask me to meet the lady who will tell me the plan.

When I went down I found the entire family waiting for him.

Even the brother who had not wanted to come meet me since I've been here. They showed me his pictures. He stood up and I was in his arms before I knew what was going on. I screamed and hit him to get myself out of his grip while crying.

Liyema: "Dammit Lungile, I told you that she is not ready for touching us," he shouted. Lakhiwe

came to hug me. She is still the only person I can allow close for who knows what reason.

Lungi: "I'm sorry. I'm the one who never listens. I got too excited," he said softly.

Lulo: "Don't touch me without permission again. Next time I will twist your balls until they turn blue," I warned.

Lungi: "Ouch" he held the front of his pants.

Zola: "I apologize on his behalf. This is Kumo, she is one of Carr's people. She is here to give you a

run down on what will happen. Is that okay with you?"

Lulo: "I said I'd do it, didn't I?"
I asked sarcastically.

Liyema: "Mma this is too big of a risk. She might get killed," he said. I laughed.

Lulo: "I've been taking risks since 16 and I'm now 35, so sit the hell down. I have faced death more than any of you combined,"

Kumo: "We don't have much time. Let's get to business,"

Lulo: "Finally someone who doesn't talk nonsense," I sat down. They sat too

I told Kumo to skip the explanation, mommy dearest gave it to me already. I asked her to get to the plan and tell me what the hell she wants me to do. She said the girls who will act as my offering to Gee, the gang leader. I thought the man would have a more powerful name. I have heard Mike say Gee many times but never thought the boss would have such a sissy name. Kumo also gave the contact for these people. She told me what to say and how to say it. She said my voice must be commanding to earn respect from word go but also

have softness to brush Gee's male ego. If there is anything I can do, is act. She set up a few things and connected it to the phone. I was nervous but I was not one to back down from a challenge. I made the call but one of the lapdogs answered. I told him I want to speak to the big boss because I have a good offer for him. I had to wait for a long while before I heard a voice on the other end of the line. I figure it's this Gee he asked me what I want.

Lulo: "I want to make you money," I said trying to sound as cool as Kumo said I should.

Gee: "Where did you get my number?" he asked. No one told me how to answer that question. I couldn't exactly ask the people in front of me either.

Lulo: "Our good friend, Mike," I said without thinking about it. I had to improvise.

Gee: "But our good friend is dead," he said. He sounds South African and Caucasian.

Lulo: "You need to thank me for killing him. He had agreed to turn

state witness. I saved you a lot of trouble by silencing him,"

Gee: "Who are you?"

Lulo: "A woman who knows Mike's network. I want to take over where he left off," I said but he kept quiet.

Gee: "Mike's girls are gone. How will you continue without girls?"

Lulo: "I have girls of my own. Young stuff who will make clients very happy. I was one of Mike's girls so I know what clients want. I have top of the range packages. All I need is your power

to move these packages. I know Mike did not do that alone,"

Gee: "And you think I won't make you a slut again?," he said and I laughed. My family looked petrified.

Lulo: "You need someone to run your operation this side. I have the skills and machandise. With your help, we could triple what Mike made you. He played it small. I'm not one to swim in shallow water," I said in a flirty voice

Gee: "How do I get hold of you?"

Lulo: "These devices are not safe. You never know who might be

listening. Let's do it old fashioned style and meet up,"

Gee: "I don't meet people personally,"

Lulo: "Then I will take my girls to someone who does. I'm sure by now you've learned what a resourceful woman I am.

Goodbye," I was about to drop the call when I heard "wait" on the other side of the line

Gee: "Okay but bring the machandise,"

Lulo: "Not until we have talked first. You see the machandise

when I say so. You kill me, you lose your chances of making millions," Kumo gave signal that it's almost time to cut the call for tracking reasons. Gee asked my location and I told him I'll be in Cape town. He gave me the time and place of the meeting. It was tonight round about midnight. We agreed and Kumo counted me down and I cut the call just as time was almost up. I know they will try track the call. Kumi said I will go in wired but I refused. It would be the first thing they check. Zola and her son's looked like they were going to burst a

vein. I asked them to excuse me so I could prepare mentally. I sat in my room for a long while. I was hungry and the smell of good food was not helping. There was a knock on the door after an hour. I let the person in and Lakiwe appeared holding food. My mouth watered.

Lulo: "Why do you do this?" I asked her.

Lakiwe: "Duh, I'm the Makoti, I'm my in laws house. I knew before I agreed to marry your brother what being a Makoti comes with,"

Lulo: "Well I was a slave once. Marriage will not make me to be one again"

Lakhiwe: "I'm no slave. You all are so emotional and all over the place someone has to feed you. I love looking after my family. I love you guys," she put the food next to me. "I'll leave you alone now," she added.

Lulo: "Thank you," I said. She smiled. "Wanna sit for a while? How are your boys?"

Lakhiwe: "Having difficulty settling in at my grandparents but as long as they are alive, I'll

live. How are you? Stupid question right?"

Lulo: "I act tough but I'm scared shitless. I'm holding people's lives in my hands. I mess this up, we die," we both exhaled loudly.

Lakhiwe: "Or you do it right and the police get that man and your sisters can return to their families,"

Lulo: "Why do you do that?" she looked at me confused. "When someone says something negative, you give them the positive outcome. You do it with your husband too,"

Lakhiwe: "Faith,"

Lulo: "How does that work?"

Lakhiwe: "You pray over situations you have no control over and hope for the best,"

Lulo: "Did you do that when your ex beat your ass?" she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I actually didn't pray during those years. I only started when I was away from him,"

Lulo: "Prayer won't serve as a bulletproof vest, Lakhiwe,"

Lakhiwe: "I don't know but it's the main reason why I am still going. I don't expect people to believe in prayer but all I ask is

that they not expect me to stop praying,"

I looked at her for the longest while. I wouldn't ask her to stop something that she believes keeps her alive. Since I would want her to teach me healing. I asked her to pray for me. I can't do she should do it. We held hands and closed our eyes. She said a prayer of protection over my life. No one has ever prayed for me, no one not even my sisters because we never prayed. I didn't feel any different after she said Amen though. I took the food and started to eat. Zola has offered

me food earlier on but I declined her food. I was starving and I will need strength for later on. I wish I knew why I had the urge to continue living. It was as if I'm looking forward to something when I had absolutely nothing to look forward to. We went back to Kumo and she showed me a picture of Gee. She said I should not cut a deal if it's not with that man. They arranged some armed men because I know Gee will not come without protection. Mike is dead and I say good riddance to bad rubbish. Him and his wife will meet in hell. I just

pray God or whoever controls the universe takes my sisters to a better place. Hours went by quickly. It was time to implement the plan. I was scared but the thought of my sisters being free at last did not allow fear to numb me. Kumo went over the plan once again. I was ready. I wore what a former prostitute would, skimpy clothes. Beautiful women joined us and they were my "packages" to Gee. I hate that this happens to women on a daily basis. Liyema said a prayer once again. I still don't like them but I don't hate them. We made our way to the

meeting place. Kumo assured me police are hiding and surrounding the place and they will act when they see something is wrong. I have put my faith in people who might put me back in the sex industry again. I can't go back there. They better put a bullet through my brain than force me to sell again. My men and I walked into the shady looking place, I have been to worse places. A group of men walked in but there was no Gee. I memorized his face from the picture well. They were a mixture of all races but the person I'm

having a deal with was not there. I told Gee I won't bring my girls out unless I talk to him and it seems he got cold feet. His men searched me and my men. Good thing none of us are wired. The bastard who searched me even rubbed my private area under my dress. I had to stop myself from kicking him. The man who I saw on the picture finally came out when we got cleared. He requested to see the "packages" before making a deal. Kumo said deal then show packages but no buyer makes agreements without seeing the goods. I had my men

go get the girls. I made sure they looked as skimpy as possible. I know what such men want to see. Gee scanned each girl while his men "searched" the girls.

These girls can act. They acted all scared and pushed these men's hands off them. Some begged to be let go. They acted like girls who really got kidnapped and were about to be sold to be sex slaves, confused and scared. Gee smiled, he looked happy with the packages.

Gee: "You are a woman of your word. My clients will love this. Come closer that we can discuss

your fees, my rules and what will happen if you break any of them. I don't know if you know the amount Mike got but don't expect the same. I do not usually do business with women especially those who used to be my stock," he said and got closer. His phone rang and he lifted his finger and answered.

I stood there keeping a straight face. I'm afraid of the man. My knees are shaking and I'm surprised I have not shit myself. When will the damn cops come out because it's him they wanted. Gee looked at me and his facial

expression changed. I knew something was wrong but I still had to keep a brave face. He dropped the call and walked closer to me. He took out his gun and pointed it straight at me.

Gee: "You set me up, you bitch. I'll be damned if I go to prison because of some slut. I'd rather die but before that I will kill you and all these bitches. See you in hell," he shouted. His man held guns on my men. I think the cops had better come now. Why have they not come out guns blazing like in all the movies? Gee sorted his gun, put his finger on the

trigger. I stood with my eyes closed ready to die. If I die at least it will be as a hero and not a prostitute. I thought of all my beautiful sisters, even the deceased ones whom I will see soon. I heard a shot being fired but felt no pain. More and more shots were fired so I had to open my damn eyes. Zola approached pointing a gun at Gee. Gee was on his knees with a bleeding hand. His gun was at a distance from him. It was a shootout between the cops and Gee's men. I went down to the ground for safety reasons. Zola walked closer to Gee

like she was invincible. A shot came from no where and hit her. She lost balance but she finally got close to Gee and shot him multiple times. It was like she just saw Gee and no one else. She literally emptied her gun on a man I think was dead already. She was bleeding a lot but looked at me. She was actually smiling. She just shot a man but is smiling? She was about to walk closer to me but someone shot her again and again and again until she fell down. I ran to her without even thinking of being shot myself. The shooting stopped. I was

screaming like crazy. Kumo came running to us. I didn't have a real grasp on reality at that moment. My focus was on Zola. Kumo made a call and I soon heard sirens.

Kumo: "Help is coming,"

Lulo: "What the fuck took you so long to come out?" I shouted.

Kumo: "We were waiting for you to part with Gee. Had we come in, people would have died,"

Lulo: "Look around you, dammit. People already are dead. Where the fuck is your help? She's losing blood," I shouted.

Kumo: "Here it's coming in. She saved you, Lulama. She shot Gee's hand just when he was about to pull the trigger. We didn't even know she was here. We would have made sure she does not come close," she said running to the paramedic to tell them help was needed. I looked at Zola who was losing so much blood. I tried to stop it with my hands but couldn't.

Lulo: "Zola, please wake up. What will I tell your children? Please do not die, they will hate me for having you killed. Zola, please, please, please don't make me

witness another death. Please do not make you watch you die. Zola!" I shouted while crying. The paramedic ordered me to get off her but I could not. "Zola!" I shouted out again. "Mama please don't die. I need you so much. You still owe me a hug. I won't reject your hugs again. Mama, Mama please," I said in a low whisper. I have lost loved ones before. I have lost a "mother" but felt nothing. Now I might lose my real mother and I felt my entire world come crashing down.

Kumo got me off her by lifting me up. I was soaked in her blood, I

reeked of her blood. A police officer had to carry me because my legs couldn't. It was the first time death sounded sweeter than life for me. All my life I've only known loss. I don't know what it's like to gain things. Now that I gained a mother who took bullets for me, I might have lost her too. Zola's son will hate me, sister or not they will hate me for having their, our mother killed. What was she thinking coming here without the police? Where the hell was she hiding if she got to us before the police? How on earth was she able to aim for the

hand that had Gee's gun in it and not miss? I have so many questions. I was taken to the hospital. They said she is still alive but it looks bad. Kumo said she called my family. I know they won't even give me the time of day. They examined me but I'm fine physically but not mentally and emotionally. They got me cleaned up but I wanted nothing more but just to go check on my mother. I did not even want their damn pills that will make me sleepy. They gave me a hospital gown and I was told Zola is still in theatre. When I got out I found

the family. Lakhiwe was the first one to run to me. I expected her slaps and spits to my face but got a hug instead. Soon I felt an even warmer and tighter hug. Liyema joined in the hug he was hugging his wife from behind. I guess he respects me not wanting them to touch me but I felt his arms around me. I felt another person hug me from my left side, it's Lungi. I felt numb and my legs failed me again but they, my family held me up. I for the first time allowed my brother's to hold me. Their touch was kind and gentle. I'm used to being touched

by men only sexual. I stood in the center of them and I cried. I was having hot flashes because I was surrounded but I did not want them to let go. I said a silent prayer, well at least what I think qualifies as prayer for my mother. It was my first prayer ever since I have been born. Even if it was my last, it wouldn't have been wasted because it's for my mother, the woman who gave me life twice. When she gave birth to me and when she saved me from a bullet tonight.

FIFTY-SIX

LULAMA

Two weeks. That is how long Zola has been in a coma. When Lakiwe heard the entire story about what happened during the shooting that night she asked to see me privately. She told me to go get treatment to prevent me from getting HIV. The hospital staff did offer it to me but I rejected it. I thought there is no way a woman who has been married for so long and she also said she never had a lover could have HIV. So Lakiwe had to explain more. She gave me a summary of the story. I never

met my father but I hate his guts already. I took the treatment and now we hope for the best. It feels good to know something about Zola that her other kids don't. I know it's no competition but they have had her all their lives and know things about her I don't but now I knew something they don't know. I've been at risk of getting HIV since I started working as a sex worker because some clients refused to condomise. But luckily I am still clean, well hopefully. I have had several STD's but all cureable. Zola's sister has also

come to see her. I actually look a lot like them. I have not been reconnected with my own sisters yet apparently for safety reasons. My siblings and I sat at the hospital. It was late night. Liyema came from his night classes a few minutes ago. Lakiwe finished writing but is still here. Her babies are still in Peddie. A white middle aged man walked towards us and Kumo followed behind. He introduced himself as David Carr. The man who helped Zola with the bust. Liyema shook his hand to give the family's gratitude. He asked us

how Zola was and apologized for only visiting now.

Carr: "I thought you folks might do with some good news. Some of Gee's men that we managed to arrest have been singing to the police in hope of getting lighter sentences. I have been working my ass off this past two weeks with my team to raid all the places they said they operated in. Gee's brother and only living family got arrested too. We managed to get all associates involved from hospital staff, police officials, casino bosses, the

works. You are free at last and all thanks to Zola,"

Lulo: "And the other girls?" I asked.

Carr: "All still safe and will be taken to their families soon. You did a great job and I'm sorry we asked you to put your life on the line but it paid off", he said with confidence.

Lulo: "Yeah but not for my mother. Thank you for your help," I said softly but sincerely. He nodded and walked away saying we won't see him again he is off to help other families. Some people

are just superheroes in human form. I can't imagine the death threats this Carr man must get on a daily basis.

Liyema: "I'm so glad all of this is over. Now we can get back to normal," he said. He looks exhausted. They will go back to normal. I will have to learn to adjust to a new life with new people.

Lulo: "Thanks, guys for everything. I know I'm a pain in the ass but thanks for using the little patience you must all have left to continue tolerating me," I looked at them all. Liyema stood.

Liyema: "You are our sister. There is nothing we wouldn't do for you. We have to be closer now more than ever since our father is I'm hiding and well Mma being in the condition she's in," he looked down.

Lulo: "Thanks for not hating me," he smiled.

Liyema: "None of us would have been able to stop Mma from going there. We are just glad you are both alive. No matter the condition she will wake up in, as long as she's alive,"

Lungi: "Plus she has always wanted to spend time with you. I

doubt death will stand in the way. You don't know our mother. Die hard," he laughed and I actually did too. It seems Lungi is the black sheep in the family. Well he should move over, because the real black sheep has arrived.

We sat on the benches waiting for visiting hours even though we know they won't be anytime soon. Lakhiwe and Liyema sat across from me. She had her legs over his and they would talk, make eyes contact, smile and kiss. They are beautiful people and I've learned that their beauty comes from within. I wonder had Mike

not taken me, would I have had a husband and kids too? How would my life have turned out? I figure good because my brothers turned out good. Lungi still needs to find his place in life but he has foundation. I still have to build foundation first. Mike and Sophie took away so much from me. The opportunity to have a real family. The chance to go to the best schools and make something of myself. They stripped me off a lot. My heart knows they are my family but my mind is too programmed into believing I could never have such a family. Zola's

phone rang, it's with Liyema. He said his father calls Zola when he can. He went somewhere private so I guess it's him. I followed him and I could hear everything. Zola's phone fell and broke so it had a speaker problem. Calls were taken on loud speaker.

Mlu: "What do you mean she got shot two damn weeks ago? I told Zola to listen to me. It seems....,"

Liyema: "I don't have time to listen to this. Call when Mma's awake," he cut his father short. He sounded angry. I think he is not a fan of our father.

Mlu: "I swear to god if my wife dies because of some girl I will...,"

Lulo: "You will what, huh? Try to kill me again since you failed to the first time?. You're a piece of shit and my mother deserves more than a damn piece of shit," I said.

Mlu: "Who the hell do you think you are, girly?" I could hear the anger in his voice.

Lulo: "Come ask me that to my damn face. You damn coward. It's easy for you to request abortions and also kill a woman but when you have to face the shit you run

into your hole. Come ask me that to my face and I'll tell you who the hell I am. Your damn wife might die but all you care about is her defying you. Man, go to hell. Damn sperm bank. You are not a father's backside..." I shouted. The line on the other side went dead. Liyema looked at me like I committed a crime. "I said what you were thinking but luckily I was not raised to respect elders even when they throw shit at me like you were," I pointed at him and he just laughed softly.

Liyema: "I'm just wondering if you and our granny will get along

because you two do not bite your tongues. I imagine personality clashes," I laughed softly. "So, therapy?" I looked at him.

Lulo: "Will it help?"

Liyema: "It won't erase the memories but it will teach you how to deal with the pain, the grief, the anger and perhaps give you ways to channel all those emotions into something that will help you," he looked at me.

Lulo: "Can I really trust you, Liyema?"

Liyema: "Let my actions convince you because words are useless. I

know men let you down but myself and Lungile are not them. We don't want to abuse you, just protect you. So determine by our actions and how you feel around us if you can trust us," he smiled.

They don't have a bad energy at all. "Everything will be done at your pace. You'll meet our father's extended family on your time.

Mma only has Makazi. We will work at your pace and your time.

If there is anything I learned from being married to a woman with a difficult past is that I need to let her breathe and she will either tell or show me what

she needs. If I push that she does this and that she gets angry. So when you are ready for therapy, tell us," he smiled.

Lulo: "What if she dies, will you still be this gentle and caring?"

Liyema: "I'd be crushed but I won't blame you. I'd actually be more sad for you,"

Lulo: "How come?"

Liyema: "Because you wouldn't get a chance to get to know her. She is strong yet gentle. To be honest with you it was as if Mma was a single mother though Ta was home. He was not present. So you

aren't missing out much from him not being in your life because we don't know him either. I do pray you get to know Mma because she is a good person. Overprotective but the best. Should she die, I want you to know it's not your fault,"

Lulo: "How can you be so sure? She went there because of me," he nodded slowly.

Liyema: "Let's sit down for a moment," he offered me a seat and we sat. "You know we had another sister who died in a car crash but we never told you how the accident happened. I was

driving the car. Lulonke got into trouble, I was forced to pick her up without the parents knowing. So on our way a drunk driver crashed into us. She died on the scene. For years I blamed myself for it. Wondering what I could have done differently to have avoided the crash but I realized that I did everything right. It was the other driver who was wrong and I had no control over that driver,"

Lulo: "Like I had no control over Zola being there that night?" I asked softly.

Liyema: "Exactly. You did everything right and Mma too but it was unfortunate that she got hurt. So I'm not going to blame you should she die,"

Lulo: "Are you hoping to find her in me?" he looked at me. "Lulonke", I added.

Liyema: "I'm hoping to find you once those walls around your heart break a little. I don't even like that you were named after her. So what will you go by? Will you take our surname? Who does your ID currently say you are?"

Lulo: "I don't have one. I was called Lulama growing up and got my trade name Blue Diamond when I started working. I don't want to live in the shadow of a dead person so I don't want to be called Lulonke. I also don't want Lulama Because Mike and Sophie gave it to me," I said softly. It's the longest conversation I've had with him.

Lungi: "Then name yourself. Create your own identity," he said while standing at the door. "Sorry sis Lakiwe got worried and said I should look for you," he added.

Lulo: "She's much younger than you though so why call her Sisi?"

Lungi: "Because she is married to that big guy and he is my older brother. You will learn how our family does things when you go to the grandparents house,"

Lulo: "Rules, I'm not good with those"

Liyema: "It's not rules. It's our identity. It's our culture passed on to us by our forefathers.

Obviously you don't have to adopt all customs because there are some we don't mainly because they don't speak to us individually

but then there are those family ones that give you a sense of belonging. A sense of pride in who you are. It's unity. Those ways teach you to be a human being with respect and humanity. So it's not rules because honestly you're not forced to live according to culture but I feel it's important to. Let me leave you two," he stood up and went to the door.

Lulo: "Hey," he looked back. "I'll take that real hug now," he smiled. He turned back and I hugged him. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and it was

the first real hug I got from a man. We broke the hug and Lungile wanted his too. There was absolutely nothing sexual about their hugs. None of them brushed my back slowly while hugging me. It was sweet.

Lungi: "So I was thinking Nopopi or Tamara for your new name," he joked and I laughed.

Lulo: "Fuck no. It must be young and current. So tell me what does Lungi do other than give his mother a headache?"

Lungi: "Oh no, Liyema turned you into a typical big sister already

when I thought you'd be fun" he frowned.

Lulo: "Take it from someone whose time got wasted by others, Lungile. You don't want to be my age and have nothing. You have all the help right in front of you. Fun and girls won't disappear. Fix your life because you will blink and you'll be an old man with regrets. Liyema is exhausted because he has been up and down with Zola looking for me. He doesn't say it but he needs you but he is afraid you'll let him down because you take nothing serious. He has you guys and his own family to look

after. Give our older brother a break sometimes,"

Lungi: "I hear you but you older,"

Lulo: "I'll let him hold on to the title. Now that I'm free I want to take back all the years of childhood I lost,"

Lungi: "Do you think about it? The nights you slept with all those men?"

Lulo: "That's for me and my therapist, buddy. Fix your own life. Your dad is an asshole by the way," he laughed.

Lungi: "Right? I'm glad someone said it," he laughed.

We went back to the rest and Lakiwe was so happy to hear her children will be back by tomorrow. She really missed them, such a mother. I told Liyema I'll take his offer of a therapist and we had a fist bump to seal the deal. I feel like he is older than me though. If only Lungi knew I won't forget the moments I had to sleep with different men on a daily basis but life goes on. I'm hoping therapy does it for me. Zola still has not woken up. I think she is now just being dramatic, Okay I taken that back. She got shot four times so

it's a miracle she's alive still. We decided to go back home and return tomorrow. None of us wanted to sleep so I helped Lakiwe make hot chocolate. I don't like that she has to serve us just because she is married to our brother. There was a knock on the door and we hated that someone visits so late. I'm at Liyema and Lakiwe's house until Zola comes from hospital. Kumo appeared with a big smile. Soon Thando, Wendy, Vivian, Zanele and Imani, my sisters appeared. Tears just rolled down my face and they ran to me. We just

hugged each other for the longest time while crying. I missed them so much. I love them so much. I looked at each of them to check if they are "whole" as I've done whenever they came from seeing clients. They look so beautiful. I introduced them to my family and the family gave us space.

Thando: "I wish Cat held on just a little while longer. She'd be here now with us, free," she cried.

Lulo: "Actually had Cat not done what she did, I would never have gotten a chance to talk to the cops. She made all of this possible.

I promised to free you guys but Cat freed us,"

Imani: "I actually have a family. I will meet them tomorrow.

Apparently my real name is Entle Tom. I got taken from the hospital in Pretoria right after I was born," she wiped her tears off.

Zanele: "I'm Portia Damon, my parents are right here in Cape Town. It explains why so many thought I'm coloured, it's because I am. I got taken during a hijacking. They took my father's car and me,"

Wendy: "I'm Samkelwa Khumalo. My sister took me to the clinic with her, a nurse took me to a private room to examine me but never returned with me. I'm from Kwa Zulu Natal,"

Viv: "I'm Siyasanda Godola, was also taken from the hospital right after birth. I'm from East London,"

Thando: "I'm Unathi Masemola. Apparently originally from Zimbabwe. My parents moved to South Africa to find work. I was taken by a woman who offered my mother a job but she never returned with me,"

Lulo: "I'm Lulonke Elephant. You are now in my brother's house.

Mike was my mother's uncle and he stole me from my grandmother,"

Viv: "How will we get used to these new identities and lives guys? For the longest time we thought we were who Mike said we were. Now we have families eagerly waiting to meet us. We don't know them or if we can even trust them. Lulama, how is it so far for you?,"

Lulo: "It's tough. I snap at them and be rude at them when they want to help. I gave my

brother's hugs for the first time today, real hugs because you know all men wanted from us was sex. It's strange for a man not to want sex from me. I thought I hated my mother but her being in hospital proved me wrong. I want her alive. So all I do it take it a day at a time. What I know is that you will hate them all at first, especially the siblings who had lived a life you also should have had but soon you'll learn it's not their fault. We will always have a bond we will never share with our real siblings. We seen and

experienced shit they can only imagine," I cried.

Thando: "I wish Cathy was here. I miss her so much. We haven't seen you two for so long. Things at that brothel were hard," she broke down.

Lulo: "I'm sorry, honey. I'm sure they were but we are free now. I'm just thankful none of us got fed drugs or this would have been an even harder journey. I'm so happy you are all safe. I love you guys so much," we held each other.

They are safe and in my arms. My baby sisters. Laksiwe came with hot chocolate for all of us and asked a question I didn't expect. She asked if they will be sleeping over so she'd arrange a room for us. We all nodded quickly and thanked her so many times. Is this woman an angel on earth? It's like she knew I wanted time with them before their families come for them. It will take time to get used to the new names or rather old original names. Laksiwe and I made a "christmas bed" for us all to sleep on. I had to hug her to thank her. She said snacks

and food are in the kitchen should we want any and then went to her bedroom. She and Liyema need time away after this. If I had money I'd pay for it. I went to get the snacks and we sat up all night talking about ways to meet so we don't become strangers to each other. It was good to have them all, well not all but those who are here with me. We even laughed. I don't know when we fell asleep but when I opened my eyes it was noon already. Kumo unfortunately had to go with them. I went with. The big sister in me wanted to meet their

families too. When we arrived at the police station it was just tears and some mothers even collapsed. It was beautiful yet so sad that such a moment had to exist because some people find it okay to steal babies. Once emotions were a bit down, we got to introductions properly. They all looked like nice people. Each family spoke to the child they last saw as a baby. Hours went by and it was time for them to go. We exchanged contact details. We hugged and cried for about 30 minutes before finally letting go. My heart is broken and happy at

the same time. Kumo took me to the hospital because she said my brothers wanted her to take me there. I'm sure Zola died. I cried my eyes out on the way too and prepared myself. When I arrived I was taken to the room she was in. I found the family surrounding her bed. Lungi took my hand and Zola had her eyes open.

Lungi: "Die hard, I told you," he said and I laughed between tears.

Liyema: "She can't talk yet but she hears us," he said. I looked at Zola and she curved her lips to smile. I could see she's in pain.

Lulo: "Hi, Zola. I'm so glad you're awake. It's been two weeks of hell. We did it, those bastards are behind bars. Except for Gee because you killed him. Thank you for everything. I'm also sorry for everything. Is it okay if I hugged her?" I looked at Liyema. Zola signaled that we sit her up straight. We called a nurse for that because the last thing we want is to sent her into another coma. She raised her hands a bit for the hug. I gave my mother the first hug ever and it felt right. I felt like I belonged for the first time. She couldn't hug

back because she can't raise her arms much let alone wrap them around me but I know she's hugging me back. I'm still hurting very, very much and it's a pain I'm not sure will go away but my life now is better than it was a month ago. I guess what I do with the change is up to me. I want a better life even when my past is dark. I'll fight my own demons to get that better life. I've always been a fighter. My sisters are safe too and I know they will look to me as an example of how to adjust to our new lives. I want to make them see it's

possible through me. We will see each other as often as we can. I'll see Zanele most since she's in Cape Town too. I can't believe we are finally free. What do I do with the freedom?

FIFTY-SEVEN

LULAMA

Zola having woken up has been the best. I wouldn't have survived her death for various reasons. She's still in hospital unable to walk. She is not paralyzed but she will need physiotherapy to be able to use

her legs again. She doesn't speak much yet either due to the operation on her neck. The doctors are hopeful though. My sisters and I call each other everyday. As expected they find it difficult to settle in. We have all been taking it a day at a time. I'm still locking myself in my room and want nothing to do with my family but they have been patient. I've been trying with Zola, I really have but I'm still struggling. Today will be my first meeting with Mrs B, Lakhiwe's therapist. I will take it as it comes. I'll also be meeting my

nephews for the very first time. Their return got delayed by a week because Lakhiwe's grandparents asked for more time with them. Lakhiwe and Lungi have gone to Peddie to get them. I actually miss them already.

I've been alone with Liyema and I admit to locking my door at night just in case. He drove me to Mrs B's office and I am nervous.

Liyema: "Should I wait outside for you?", he asked.

Lulo: "Actually go have a beer, big brother. You need to chill a bit," he laughed softly. The first man I'm learning to trust.

Liyema: "I'll go grab some carrot juice instead. My body is close to giving up. I'll also go and take a nap since the boys will be home soon. It'll be a mad house but you will see for yourself. See you in two hours," he smiled.

Lulo: "I know you'll be parked here thirty minutes before my time is up. You've become predictable, Mr Elephant," we both laughed.

Liyema: "I know I'm boring,"

Lulo: "I did not say boring. You are just safe," I smiled. I opened the door and was about to go but he held my hand. I actually didn't

put defences on because it was innocent. I looked at him.

Liyema: "I'm proud of you," he smiled. I nodded and walked inside the building.

No one has ever been proud of me. My brother is and him saying it left a fuzzy feeling inside my heart. I didn't want my hand held when going to my therapist. I wanted that independence I never had. People looked at me, smiled and greeted. It felt strange because before people looked at me and spat at me or insulted me but not now. I went to the receptionist who wanted

know what I use for my skin. I told her water and soap only. She directed me to the person I'm here to see. A lovely lady appeared. About Zola's age. She greeted me and invited me in her office. It looked more like a lounge than an office but okay. Mrs Bam introduced herself and I did too. She told me to be comfortable. She first made small talk and I talked back.

Mrs B: "I have a feeling that I'm talking to a person who knows what they want. You know why you took this leap to come talk to me. I know it takes a lot

of courage. I'll be making notes as we talk because I want to keep everything in my memory. Should you feel uncomfortable please don't be afraid to let me know. Firstly tell me what brings you here?" she looked at me.

Lulo: "To get your help obviously," I said sarcastically.

Mrs B: "I know that but I want to here what you need help with first. I want to get a better understanding of who you are and what we are dealing with,"

Lulo: "Firstly I want to know if you are qualified in trauma

counselling. I don't want to talk to some bogus therapist who only milks my brother dry," I said with attitude and she smiled.

Mrs B: "Okay, I'm a qualified trauma counsellor. I've attended several trauma counselling workshops. I've interned at various trauma centres before working here. You are free to check some of my qualifications on the wall over there," she pointed behind me. I stood up with confidence and went to check. I did not know what I'm looking at. I can read but I'll just take her word for it. I sat back down.

Lulo: "Have you dealt with your own trauma if you have any? The last thing I want is for you to drag me into your trauma too just because you didn't deal with it," I looked at her.

Mrs B: "Yes, I've gone to therapy several times in the past. Don't worry, I have dealt with my trauma in a healthy way. I'd like to help you get to that point too,"

Lulo: "What type of trauma?" I folded my arms.

Mrs B: "I'll tell you in one of our other meetings. Today's one if for

me to know you better. I love your questions they prove that you are an intelligent young lady. Most don't bother to ask if I'm qualified to help them through this journey. I like that you first wanted to know if I won't lead you deeper into a dark pit. Tell me about your moods please. I know moods change from time to time. Just give me an overall view of your mood," I looked at her.

"Nothing you share with me will leave this room. If you fear I'll tell your family don't," she said softly. I eased into the couch.

Lulo: "My general mood I'd say is confusion. Every other mood hides under the confusion umbrella," I said in a whisper. She wrote down something.

Mrs B: "Tell me more about what that means please. Why are you feeling confused more than anything else?"

Lulo: "Because I no longer know who I am. Even as a prostitute, I at least had an identity. Now I feel lost,"

Mrs B: "What do you think needs to happen for you to find that identity you seek? If you had a

magic wand what would you change?" I took a deep breath and exhaled.

Lulo: "If I had a magic wand I would erase everything of my past. I wouldn't even be here needing your help. I would have been traveling the world, perhaps with a husband and a bunch of kids. I wouldn't be here. I would know my place in the Elephant family. Liyema is the family backbone. Lungi even as the black sheet at least has his mark too. I just don't feel like I belong with them,"

Mrs B : "Did Mike give you a sense of belonging?" her question hit deep. I started to cry. "If you are not ready to answer, it's okay," she added and gave me a tissue.

Lulo: "I want to answer," I said between sniffing.

Mrs B: "Take your time," she said with such kindness in her voice.

Lulo: "It's actually si...si...sick that I had a sense of belonging with him. What victim of human trafficking says that? With Mike I was Bl...Blue Diamond. I was his...his best girl. I had that

identity and I thought I'd feel free when I lose it but...but I feel so naked... I feel more naked now than I did with any man. I do not know how to find myself," I broke down. She waited for me to calm down.

Mrs B: "When your family talks about you, which identity do you feel they give you?"

Lulo: "A sister, a daughter, an aunt, a granddaughter and all the other typical family titles," I cleaned my nose.

Mrs B: "How does that make you feel?",

Lulo: "Pressured because I find it difficult to identify as that. I want to see myself as they do but I'm struggling so much. I don't know why I can't just fall into the roles,"

Mrs B: "Maybe you need to first fill the role of who you are to yourself first before you can know who you are in other people's lives. When you came in you mentioned I shouldn't be comfortable with calling you Lulama because you will be changing it soon. Could that perhaps be the first step to creating an identity for yourself?"

Lulo: "I don't know. Maybe once I have named myself and taken some control over my life, I'll have some sense of identity. I'll take their surname, I'm an Elephant but I do not want their name. I'm not Lulonke," I blew my nose.

Mrs B: "Have you thought of names yet?" I looked at her. I actually have but non speak to me.

Lulo: "Not yet," I was not confident enough to share yet.

Mrs B: "How about you list all the names you've thought of so far. We can choose together," I smiled

and nodded. "Would you like to tell me more about what life was like with Mike and his wife?" her question made my mood change. I'm here for help though so I'll answer.

Lulo: "It was hell. Well the first 15 years were normal I guess. But after my 16th birthday thing became worse and never got better again. There was a time in my twenties when they made me see ten clients on the same day. I couldn't feel my legs afterwards and my privates were on fire. Sophie made me sit on a bucket with hot water. Saying the

steam would ease the pain but I would never forget the sting caused by that steam on my already sore vagina. I once refused a clients request and ended up with broken ribs all thanks to Mike. Life with them was hell. I lived in hell on a daily basis. There were nights my sisters couldn't do their job because they couldn't stay strong. As the older one I assisted their clients to lessen their pain," I said while looking at her. She couldn't contain her own tears and apologized. I didn't have a problem with her crying.

If anything it showed me she has a heart.

We spoke more and I was actually surprised that we had a conversation. It was easier with her since she's a stranger. She made me open my thoughts and feelings to her. I cried and cried but she waited for me to collect myself. She asked me what makes me feel better but I told her nothing. I think she challenged me to find that something and use it as an escape. I surprisingly felt better after the first session. I told her things I could never tell my family because some

things would be too deep for their fragile hearts. When I was done I found my brother waiting as I expected. He took me out for ice cream and I went to see a movie at the cinema for the first time. We watched comedy and laughed our asses off. Today's day was not bad at all. We drove to the hospital and got great news. Zola would be discharged tomorrow. We arrived and found her sitting up. She looks stronger. She smiled when she saw us.

Zola: "Did you hear I can go home tomorrow?" she asked in a low voice.

Lulo: "With the fees these people charge, one would think they would perform a healing miracle on you," she laughed but felt pain so she had to stop. "I'm sorry. Also, Zola your man has not called. It's my fault, I'm sorry. I told him he is shit," I confessed. She looked at Liyema.

Liyema: "He is sulking. No child called him that before. He will call,"

Zola: "Let him worry about himself. How was your first session?" she looked at me.

Lulo: "Okay. I'm not healed from my past trauma but it was okay. Look, Zola I still have a long way before I forgive you guys. I really do and I won't pretend like I've forgiven,"

Zola: "Take your time. I'm just happy that you are here, that's all,"

Lulo: "So are we going back to your house tomorrow?"

Liyema: "You guys will stay with us until Mma has healed," he said quickly.

Zola: "No, Ndoda. We need to give you and Lakhawe time to breath.

Makazi will take us in. There is no male figure so Lulo will be at ease there. Makazi was a nurse so I'm in good hands,"

Lulo: "I'm okay with that.

Because your house does not have many rooms, Liyema. I'll need a room of my own for privacy, I'm not being demanding I'm just...,"

Liyema: "I understand but we will come visit as often as possible.

The boys are coming back later.

I'll bring them over to Makazi's tomorrow," Zola smiled.

Zola: "I've missed them so much.

Will you really be comfortable? You

can stay at Liyema's until I'm better," I smiled.

Lulo: "I actually want to be close to you," I said. I really do want to be close to her. I want to get as much love and affection from her. Maybe it fill fill some of the cracks in my soul.

Zola: "Ndoda, thank you for everything. Now you can focus on yourself. Please refill my jar with water but not tap water," she asked Liyema. He went out to buy bottled water.

Lulo: "Lakhiwe told me about your status. Only because she had to

since I touched your blood. I'm still waiting to check if the pills are working. I hate that a man who was supposed to protect and love you did this,"

Zola: "Please do not harbor hate for Mlungisi. He is not worth it,"

Lulo: "I also suspect you got your revenge. I read up on his case and the relationship with this woman. It was just too convenient how the evidence just pointed to him. I mean he's a smart man who knows the law. There was no way he would hide evidence for weeks after a killing. I read he said he did not know where the gun came

from. You are closest to him. I suspect you planted it there," she just looked at me.

Zola: "Lulo...,"

Lulo: "It's okay. I won't tell anyone. He deserves it after everything he did to you. And the bitch deserved it too,"

Zola: "How?..."

Lulo: "Did I bind the dots?. I love mystery. I figure things out quickly. Plus the way you pulled the trigger at your target takes skills. No housewife can be that lucky. Maybe one day you will tell me what kind of woman Nozolile

Elephant really is because I get an idea she's not just a sorry ass housewife,"

Zola: "I don't want your brothers to know any of this,"

Lulo: "If they do then it won't be from me. You just get better. I want to get to know you. The DNA proved I'm yours without a doubt. I'm prepared to get to know you. I'm not saying we will go on mother daughter bonding dates but I at least want to be able to sit in a room with you without feeling awkward."

I sat with her for a while and even read for her until visiting hours were over. I've been thinking about that ass holes case for a while now. I'm surprised he has not figured out his wife did him bad. I don't blame her. I will keep her secret. Liyema and Lungi might know her but I feel I'm about to know the real her. I'm looking forward to having that conversation with her. Liyema had to go meet a client so I asked him to drop me off at the house. I watched movies, played music and even wrote. I think I might just write

a memoir someday when I'm in a good space. I eventually fell asleep not having fear in my heart. When I opened my eyes I got greeted by eight eyes looking right at me. I sat up on the couch and looked around. Lakhiwe waved from the kitchen. I waved back. I looked back in front of me and the boys were just starrng at me.

Lulo: "Shooo!" I said trying to get them away from me. I remembered they are babies, not birds. They just stared. "Lakhiwe, they are just starrng. What

should I do?" I shouted while sitting back on the couch.

Lakhiwe: "Apparently babies stare most at pretty people, so take it as a compliment. Just say hi, they don't bite. I'm making snacks for us," she said. What should I do with these people?

Lulo: "Good boys," I said but put my hand over my face for my stupidity. They aren't dogs either. I've never been around babies, just my younger sisters but I was young then. These four did not even blink. One of them went to pick up a stuffed toy. I'm sure to throw it at me, the

alien. He actually gave it to me. I smiled. "Oh thank you," I loosened up a bit.

Bukhosi: "Bhabha" he also gave me a toy,". Look at me being an aunt. I felt so proud of myself.

Lakhiwe: "This is Dabawo, say Dabs," she put the food on the table, hugged me and looked at them. "Dabs," she repeated slowly.

Banele: "Daa," he looked and pointed at me. That's it, I'm sold. I love these people. I don't even have to think about it. I got toys and a title?.

Lakhiwe: "They will warm up to you in a few minutes. How was your day?"

Lulo: "Went out with my brother, saw your therapist, saw Zola. It was not bad. I'll cook tonight also, rest your feet and get ready for competition. After this Liyema will meet me in dark allies to get my food in secret," she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "Then you might as well take him to your mother's house too," I laughed.

Bubele: "Ups" he looked at me and smiled. My heart is full.

Lulo: "Yes, my boy,"

All of them got on the couch and I got hugged. Warm, snuggly hugs. I've never felt more content. These are the only men I fully trust as of now. I'm an aunt. We played with their toys on the mat. They have gotten used to me so easily. Lakhiwe went upstairs to nap because I said I'll play with them until she is up. Lungi came from the guestroom from his nap. He greeted and went to the fridge.

Lungi: "Arg man, just because they don't drink it doesn't mean they can't stock up on beer for visitors," he shouted.

Lulo: "I wish I had your problems if your brother not having beer is the only thing frustrating you,"

Lungi: "Wanna go grab a bite?"

Lulo: "I'm babysitting," Liyema walked in. His boys all left me to run into his arms. They are so happy to see him.

Lungi: "Their dad is here. Bhuti, I'm taking Lulo for a bite,"

Liyema: "But Lala said Lulo would cook for us," he sounded really disappointed.

Lulo: "He heard that I went out with you earlier on and is jealous.

I'll have a coffee with him and return to cook,"

Liyema: "It's no competition but okay. Is my wife upstairs?"

Lulo: "Taking a nap,"

Lungi went to get his wallet and car keys. His car has been here since he left with Lakhiwe.

Liyema thanked him for going to Peddie with Lakhiwe. I think Lungi is proving to his brother he can be relied upon. We hopped into his car and he said he knows exactly where to get the strongest coffee that we need. I trusted him to take me to his

joint, I really love coffee. All kinds. He parked his car and led me inside. It was no coffee shop but a bar/club. I didn't have a problem with it but I won't drink. Lungi: "Oh come on, it'll help you forget about things for a while," Lulo: "Only for those things to come flooding back once again. No, thanks. Just don't drink so much that you are unable to drive," He promised and he drank his beers. I told him it's enough but he said he was okay. I was okay with things until someone said "Blue Diamond". I flipped and I

shook like I was having a fit. Suddenly the club was too small. I took Lungi's phone and called Liyema. I hated the thought of getting Lungi in trouble but I wanted to get out of here.

Liyema said he was on his way. I sat waiting while looking after drunk Lungi. The man who called me Blue approached again and I was ready to stab someone. He thought I'm on duty and started to touch me. I pushed him away but he stuck to me. The men at the bar didn't even care. A guy got yanked off me and Liyema beat the hell out of him, like beat

him shitless. He is angry. The three of us got to the car and drove in silence. I ran up to my room and locked it as soon as I arrived. Will I ever lead a normal life? Will people forever see a prostitute? I cried my eyes out. I don't blame Lungi but I'll never go places with him again if those are his kind of places. I heard Liyema shout from downstairs and the kids were crying. It was a mess and I covered my ears with a pillow while crying. I indeed still have a long way to go. After I stayed in the room a while I went out to cook. I found

Lakhiwe already taking out pots but I told her I'd cook. Liyema apologized on behalf of Lungile again. I just asked that they leave the kitchen while I cook. Well they listened but not the boys but I didn't mind them. I sat them down on their chairs and we actually had fun cooking while we sang all the crèche song I remembered. They are excited to have a new person. I loved them, no doubt. The first family I'm able to say I truly love. I dished up when I finished cooking. I helped Lakhiwe feed them and even bath them. I don't know

how they cope alone. The kids were put to sleep and we just sat in silence. Lungi was sleeping the booze off on the couch. When he wakes up he will realize just how creative his nephews are with markers. There was a knock on the door and Liyema went to open. I heard him say "Makhulu". Lakhawe and I stood too. The elderly woman came straight to me. She held my face her hands looking at me. Now I know where I got the awkward lips.

Makhulu: "Mahlubi, Mbinga, Dladla, MaMlambo, Onoxhaka, oSenene, oLubisi, Mlambo

ongawelwayo owelwa zinkonjane
zodwa pho nazo ukuba zinempiko,
sizalo sika Gxiva," she shouted
while looking at me with tears
flowing from her cheeks yet she
was rejoicing and dancing. I got
goosebumps. I for the first time
felt like I belonged. "Who shall I
say my child is?" she asked. She
asked in such a way that made
me feel like I know who I already
am.

Lulo: "Mahlubandile, Makhulu," I
said with such confidence and
surity.

She recited my clan names and
telling the Hlubi ancestors that

they should rejoice because Mahlubandile has come home. My name means the Hlubi clam has increased. It signifies that the family has grown for a new member has joined. It's powerful, it's mine and I love it. Watching my grandmother whom I was told is sick dance before me while still praising me with the names of my forefathers gave me my first sense of belonging. I am Mahlubandile Elephant, you may call me MaHlubi by my clan name, my identity.

FIFTY-EIGHT

Lakhiwe

It's been a busy couple of months filled with ups and downs. I love Hlubi's name and I love that it's the first of it's kind in the Elephant family. She knows her mother and father wanted all their kids to be L. Elephant and I love how she rebelled against that. She's Miss M. Elephant so you have two options it's either you tolerate it or you tolerate it. That's what she tells us it's her way of saying screw you I don't give a damn what you think. We have become great friends. Mrs B is doing wonders with her. We can

all see a chance. Hlubi likes to read a lot. If she's not reading murder mystery books or her father's law books, she's writing. Rome was not built in a day so she obviously still has her extremely low moments when neither of us should even dare to touch her. Her mother makes means for her to see her sisters twice a month. They agree on a venue and Mrs E carry the expenses together with the other families. I love that they allow the girls to get together. They are sisters after all and finding out they are not blood related shouldn't break the

bond. She had also been giving me tips on how to excite my husband. At first it was awkward but Liyema loves everything new I've introduced but I don't tell him his sister teaches me, I say I read it online. Mma is healing well and Tata has not called since Hlubi called him shit, his ego must have taken a huge knock or something might be wrong.

Today is a very important day for Liyema and I. We are celebrating one year of marriage. A whole year! So much has happened during the year but I'm glad we were by each others side each

day. I got up and found that he was not in bed so I chilled in bed a while waiting for breakfast in bed with a kiss. I waited for too long so I got up and went to inspect the coast. I'm sure he made a special breakfast. I don't mind the kids joining but later they have to go to granny while mommy and daddy celebrate. I got him a new watch from his favourite brand, Liyema is a watch man so I hope he will like it. Mma helped me get it after the 20 exclusive ones got sold out. She told me not to worry about the rest of the costs because it's

her gift to us. I'm going to give it to him when we are alone. I walked downstairs only to find his siblings with him and the kids. It was chaos. I first looked at the kitchen. No special breakfast, nothing. Liyema has been so involved with his family and I don't mind but I thought today would be for me, for us alone. My babies came to hug me, at least I got a hug while Liyema is busy laughing his ass off making jokes that aren't even funny. I greeted them and they just waved and got back to their conversation. I went to the kitchen, took out

pots and spoons just to make noise while I banged them on the table. Liyema came to the kitchen holding a box. It was not big but not too small either. I smiled, it's my gift for sure.

Liyema: "Lala, sorry we didn't have time to make breakfast. We had cereal," he kissed me.

Lakhiwe: "It's okay, baby. So you didn't forget after all. I see the box," I smiled.

Liyema: "How could I forget? This is one of the biggest moments in my life. I've been

waiting for this match since last week," he said with confidence.

Lakhiwe: "What?" I said softly trying to hold back my tears.

Liyema: "Check these cool items that I got. I want everyone to see which team I'm supporting even the blind," he said with excitement and took out Blue Bulls essentials. From flags, to stickers and fake tattoos. "The boys will even have their first face painting today. We are so excited. Go Bulls,"

Lungi: "Yeahhhhhh, baby. It's going to be a Blue night day!," he

shouted from the lounge," I wanted to throw a pan at Liyema. Our first anniversary and he does this?

Liyema: "Baby, I'll see you later. We will first go meet up with other Bulls fans for a braai. I'm taking the boys with. They need to see how legends do a pre-celebration. Don't worry, Lungi and I will look after them. You know Kumkani's house, he has kids so it'll be fun. My boys will have their watch their first live rugby match. I think their blood is blue," he said. Is it okay to slap him now?

Lungi: "Let's go. We don't wanna miss the best part of the celebration. I'll bring your boys back in one piece, sis. All five of them," he shouted.

Hlubi: "Just go already annoying suckers," she shouted.

Liyema: "I love you," he kissed me "I'll tell you all about it. This is the first thing I've done with Lungi in a while. It means a lot," he smiled.

They put on their ugly Blue Bulls stuff on their ugly faces while I looked at them with disgust. I wanted to put laxative in their

drinks so they would sit on the toilet all through this stupid game. I love that the brothers are bonding, but today of all days? Each took two little Bulls fans under the arms and carried them to the car. I don't like Liyema right now. I took out the pan and slammed it on the stove. Hlubi came to stand by the door. I ignored her and aggressively made myself food.

Hlubi: "What's wrong?" she finally asked after ten whole minutes of waiting for her to ask.

Lakhiwe: "Nothing," I mumbled while sulking. "You know what?"

Your brother is a bum," I shouted.

Hlubi: "An ass. The worst of it's kind too, both of them. They didn't get me a ticket," she said. Is she really going on about not getting a ticket? .

Lakhiwe: "In fact you're a bum too, Mahlubandile Elephant. Today you are all just bums and not cute ones either," she looked at me confused.

Hlubi: "Mmm my favourite sister is not good. Talk to me," she came closer. I started to cry. She wanted to comfort me but I

threw a raw egg at her. I felt like screaming.

Lakhiwe: "It's our anniversary today," I said softly and sat down crying. "I can forgive him forgetting our tenth, Hlubi but our first. It's like the whole court thing again. Your brother remembers the smallest of things, unimportant things but can not remember something this big. I don't like him right now. I hope the rugby ball hits his big head," I said and she laughed.

Hlubi: "I'm sorry and I feel you but why didn't you say anything while he was here?"

Lakhiwe: "Do you know I've never heard him say he's going to spend the day with Lungi since we got married. I can't deprive Lungi of that," I said and she smiled.

Hlubi: "You need to stop putting yourself last on everything, Khi-Khi. I agree with you Liyema is an ass for forgetting. I wish that two biggest rugby players tackle them,"

Lakhiwe: "No I don't want him to get hurt. I still need to have a word with him. I imagined breakfast in bed or a breakfast date in a nice cosy place. He has been so lost in his family business

with everything that has happened. I don't mind though, I married a family oriented man and it's one of the things I find sexy in him. I just miss him, Hlubi. I miss him," I cried.

Hlubi: "I'm calling him to tell him to get his ass back here and spoil you rotten even if I have to hold a damn gun to his head for him to do it" she said and took her phone.

Lakhiwe: "I don't want him to be forced. I'll just take my snacks and eat myself into a coma while I look at the time on the watch I got him waiting for the day to go by," I said while looking out

the window and she crack up in laughter. "How could you laugh at my pain, Matlubi heee?" I looked at her. She laughed so much that her laugh made me laugh. Hlubi has those strange sounding laughs. When she jokes I laugh more at the way she laughs than the joke. "Just shut up, Matlubi," I said but I was already laughing my lungs out too.

Hlubi: "I'm... I'm sorry it's just the way you stood looking out the window while saying that. Like a wife waiting for her husband to come back from World War II. You

are so dramatic damn but I love it," she wiped her tears off.

Lakhiwe: "Screw you guys today. I don't want anything to do with Elephants today. You can even keep those four who could not wait to leave with their father too," I looked at her.

Hlubi: "Okay I'm sorry, my beautiful friend and sister. Let's go out. It'll be my anniversary gift to you. When he gets back we will just attack him with words and perhaps rotten eggs. Deal?" she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "I don't know. Everything is just dark. It's like I'm searching for light but I....," the way she looked at me made me stop. She had that "really now?" look. "Okay but you will pay. I don't want to touch that bum's money either," she smiled.

Hlubi: "Let me call Zola. She knows these pampering places. When they are done with you, you will see light in your day again. Leave the Elephant men, even the four cute innocent ones who are guilty by association. Go shower. Put on a cute dress or short, it's hot out.

I'll call Zola and make a list of girly things we can do,"

I walked upstairs to my room to shower. I wanted to bleach Liyema's suits too but I have not yet reached that level of crazy. I took a long cool shower thinking about everything I'll say to Liyema when I see him. I even thought of how he might reply and prepared comebacks for those too. Technically I'm having a hypothetical argument in my head with my husband. I'm ready to face him. I got out of the shower and chose a nice white summer dress. I made the bed up and got

dressed. Hlubi told me not to make up on because we will have facials, do nails, the works. The other annoying thing is the fact that Liyema took the car. Lungi left with his car's keys. We called a taxi. I was not in the mood for all of this. I just wanted to sleep the day away and wake up only to eat junk food. I'm feeling depressed. I was supposed to be in my husband's arms right now and for a chance be away from everyone and everything else. The taxi stopped at a Spa/salon type of place. Hlubi looked so excited. She literally pushed me inside but

not violently. I was just dragging my feet. We got inside and the lady helped us immediately. I opted for the massage first. The lady said I was tense, she had no idea how much. I started to relax when she slid her oily hands over my back. I actually fell asleep. I got woken up when the massage was over. They served us drinks while we got our nail did. I got a fresh haircut too. We then went for retail therapy afterwards. She helped me fit a beautiful stiletto.

Lakhiwe: "Hlu-Hlu, thanks for this. You actually made my day," I smiled.

Hlubi: "I'm glad I could take your mind of things. I know this really must have slipped his mind at least now we know it's not because of an ex," we both laughed.

Lakhiwe: "What if I'm boring to him?", she looked at me like I'm insane.

Hlubi: "You have more fun in your pinky than Liyema has on his entire body. Men and sports, it's a

totally different love story," I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "He will have plenty of time to watch his sport while sleeping on the couch. I like this. We need to do it more often but broke people style," we laughed.

Hlubi: "You are not broke at all but I hear you. Lakhiwe," she said softly.

Lakhiwe: "Mm" I looked at her.

Hlubi: "I never thought I'd love another woman as I do my sisters but... I love you," she said softly and looked down.

Lakhiwe: "I love you too, sis. I love having someone, a friend close. Thank you for being a friend," I opened my arms. We hugged.

We have gotten really close. When she can't stand her mother she comes straight to our house and spend the night until she has cooled off. The boys absolutely love her. I know life is still difficult for her. I know that we at times still feel like strangers to her but after Makhulu's visit, she adjusted a bit.

Hlubi: "So I'm thinking of going back to school to complete matric

next year," I was so happy to hear her say that. I'm proud of her for just considering it.

Lakhiwe: "Go for it. By then you'll have your ID with your real names. Do it and if you want to go beyond matric I'll support you,"

Hlubi: "Do you think I can still become a prosecutor? I mean by the time I'm done studying I'll be above the age job seekers want," she said in a whisper.

Lakhiwe: "Let us deal with that when we get to it. For now let's just prepare for you to start attending classes to pass your

matric. I know a few very good colleges who offer such and it's not expensive,"

Hlubi: "Yes, I wanna do it. Even if I don't get employed at least I'd have achieved something,"

We fit more shoes and she bought me two pairs. I feel so spoiled today. It even mended my broken heart a bit. We went to watch movies. We ate lunch. It was just a great day. She then asked me to go pick a dress for her because she and Mma will be going to some function. What function? I don't know because she wouldn't say. I called Liyema and there was noise

in the background so he couldn't talk. I wanted to remind him it's our day and that we can still salvage what's left of it. The lady of the dresses was not there so we went and more girly things. We went to the ladies at the salon for professional make up. I never wore make up so beautifully as when I did as I looked in the mirror. I wish Liyema could see this. The sun was starting to set and the dress lady called. We rushed to her building before she could leave again. Hlubi fit her dress while I sat and took pictures of her. She looks

beautiful. The lady showed me
Mma's dress. And it was so Mma.
Hlubi finally revealed that the
event is to go support Mr Carr
next week. He is getting an
honorary award for his work and
he truly deserves it. I read up on
the man and his work is
remarkable. How he saves women
on a daily basis deserves more
than an award. Sandy, the
designer asked me to stand up.
She looked at my body.

Sandy: "Will you please model a few
dresses for me. I want to see
how they look when they move

and I'm sure they will fit you perfectly," she pleaded.

Lakhiwe: "I'm sorry but I'm really tired. Your client had me on my feet all day," I lied. I didn't want to undress and get dressed again. It's also night already I'm ready for Liyema.

Sandy: "Please, my darling. I'll even pay you to do it. I hate that I've only seen it on a doll," she begged.

I couldn't say no to her because she must need help if she is willing to pay. I put on a few outfits and actually liked it. She

had me pose and too pictures of me. Like professional pictures with lighting and stuff. I felt like a real model. She made me put on a beautiful red dress. I felt sexy yet so elegant in it. She told me that she has to take a picture of it on the roof. She fixed my make up once again and the three of us walked upstairs and to the roof. Oh but Cape Town is beautiful at night. Sandy told me to stand against the railing of the roof and look out into the city below me. She stood behind me and I could hear the clicking of the camera and the flashing until it

stopped. I looked back to see
what was going on. The roof area
suddenly had beautiful fairy lights
all over it. It was breathtaking.

Liyema: "Love has truly been good
to me

Not even one sad day

Or minute I had since you come
my way

I hope you know I gladly go

Anywhere you take me

It's so amazing to be loved

I'd follow you to the moon in the
sky above

I got, got to tell you how you
thrill me

I'm happy as I can be
You have come and it has changed
my whole world
Bye bye sadness, hello mellow
What a wonderful day
It's so amazing to be loved
I'd follow you to the moon in the
sky above, above," he sang for me
while slowly walking to me. I cried
so much. I take back everything
bad I wished would happen to
him. I love Luther Vandross but
oh his song sounds so much better
coming from my husband because
it's meant for me only. I cried so
much until he finished singing. He

cupped my face in his hands and wanted me to look at him, but I couldn't.

Lakhiwe: "I thought you forgot, baby," I said in a whisper and buried my face in his chest.

Liyema: "Are you kidding me? Forget the day I married the most important woman of my life? I could never forget this day. I love you more now than I did this time a year ago," he kiss my forehead.

Lakhiwe: "I felt so selfish for not being happy with you spending time with Lungile. I even wished

you two would get diarrhea while at the game," I confessed.

Liyema: "And had I really forgotten our anniversary, I'd have deserved it. Now look at me please," he said and I lifted my head to look at him. He looked at me for a while. This man is still able to make me feel butterflies in my stomach. He wiped my tears off and kiss me. We have been kissing during the difficult times but this kiss felt different. It was passionate yet gentle at the same time. "Thank you for the beautiful year of being my wife. I've seen you support me and my

family when we were having difficulty. When I suggested the boys be taken to Peddie without even talking to you first you didn't object and that has made me feel like you trust my lead. I don't know what I would be without, MamTshawe. You have carried..., he started to cry. "You have carried me on days where I felt too exhausted to go on. You have loved me with a love I, Liyema never thought I'd be blessed with. You've given me four handsome sons. You've not only been by my side in family matters but also in business. I thank God

every single day for you. Thank you for a beautiful year. It was not easy but I think we have become stronger as partners because of it. I want you to know that I will always support your dreams. I love you so much," he smiled.

Lakhiwe: "Baby," I covered my face with my hands and started to cry. He hugged me while kissing my bare shoulders. "I don't know what to say. I mean I've spent the entire day thinking about what I will say when I give you an earful and now this," he laughed softly. I wiped my tears

off and collected myself to look at him. "I love being married to you, Liyema Elephant. I love it so much when people say things like "look, your husband has come to get you," and I'd turned around to find you waiting by the car smiling and get your hugs after a long day. I love seeing you with our children. Had someone told 18 year old Ntombi that she'd be married to an amazing, God fearing man I'd have laughed in their faces. Thank you for being patient with me when I have my depressed moments even when you don't understand them. Supporting you

comes naturally to me because you support me wholeheartedly. I do trust your lead because you lead our family with love and compassion. I've seen you take your father's place in the family. I've seen you with your sister and I loved you more with each day that passed. I love how I am when I'm with you. Goodness, baby I can go on the entire night. I love you too, Mlambo," we both started to cry but with smiles on our faces. He kissed every spot on my face and I blushed like a teenager.

Liyema: "You look beautiful. I have arranged for the boys to be with the family for tonight and tomorrow. I want to make love to you and hold you all night. I want to wake up tomorrow and take it from where we left off tonight. I have missed you," he kissed me passionately. I got so turned on. I wanted him so badly. "Just not yet, Lala. I still need to feed you,"

Lakhiwe: "I want you though," I kissed him while brushing his manhood over his pants. I could feel it get excited in my hands.

Liyema: "No, Lakhiwe. I still have plenty planned for tonight before that. Don't look at me like that either," he laughed softly. He led me to the other side of the roof and there was a table and we had our own personal waiter. My man pulled out a chair for me before filling my glass with non alcoholic champagne. The waiter then served our starter.

Lakhiwe: "I feel so special. I've watched this on movies so many times," I said excitedly. "So when I called where did the noise come from," he laughed.

Liyema: "The guys who were decorating the place were kind enough to make some noise. I never set foot at the game. Heck there is no game today, not a Bulls one. I'm sorry for making you think I forgot but I made sure Matlubi keeps you busy. Are you really my wife?" he looked at me before kissing me.

Lakhiwe: "Let's go somewhere private and I can tell show you," I said in a sexy voice and kissed him.

Liyema: "No," I felt so disappointed. This man is making me beg for what's mine.

I let him play hard to get and enjoyed the night. The food was great and the company even more so. We even danced and looked over the city lights while kissing. His phone rang and he answered it with a smile.

Liyema: "Your gift has just arrived," he smiled.

Lakhiwe: "I left yours at home, baby,"

Liyema: "I'll get it when we get home tomorrow night. Let us go sign for yours, the delivery man is waiting downstairs,"

We walked off the building's rooftop and took the lift down. I expected to see a delivery man with a clipboard waiting for us to sign but no such. Liyema led me outside and the first thing I saw was a red shiny mini Cooper with a huge bow on it. I looked at Liyema and he was smiling. A gentleman handed me the key. He said it's mine.

Lakhiwe: "No, no, no, baby," I covered my face and sobbed again.

Liyema: "It's not going to make us starve, Lala. Unfortunately it's a second hand but in a few years I'll get a brand new one straight

from the manufacturer to you, " he said but I just cried. "Don't you like it?. Lala, please say something," he pleaded.

Lakhiwe: "I love it, baby. I'm just.. I'm just happy and overwhelmed. I love it so much. It's beautiful. Thank you. My gift is nothing compared to this," he walked closer to me.

Liyema: "I love it already. Thank you. So will you please give your husband a lift to the hotel I booked us in?" I laughed softly.

Lakhiwe: "What will I get as payment?" he laughed.

Liyema: "Anything you want," he kissed me. "Anything," he looked at my body.

Lakhiwe: "I want you," I looked at him with such lust.

I kissed him and he grabbed my bum with such intent. We got into my new baby. I looked at her first. There is no way four seats will fit at the back and I was happy. I thanked my hubby again before driving off. He gave me directions to the hotel. I didn't want to get out of my car. We went to our hotel room and the setting is beautiful. Flowers everywhere. I wanted to go

freshen up first before we could get down to business. We went to take a fruit bath together, something I never did before. We couldn't wait to get out of the water and when we finally did we were all over each other. We were both still wet because we didn't wipe our bodies when we came out of the bath. I wanted him to skip the foreplay and get straight to business but Liyema was in no rush. He placed traces of kisses from my breasts down my stomach and ended up kissing me between my thighs. He was driving me insane. I felt his

mouth on my love bud and I didn't know what to do with myself. He stopped just when I was about to reach the blissful edge and kissed me. He put a condom on and gave me what I've been wanting all night long. First it was long, gentle strokes but things got heated after a while. He lifted me up against the headboard and the strokes were quick and so electrifying. I didn't want the moment to stop but both our bodies decided otherwise when we had orgasms the same time. We continued to hold on to each other

while trying to breath properly again. He looked at me and smiled. Liyema: "Happy Anniversary. I love you," he kissed me. I wrapped my legs around his waist and held on tighter. I wanted him inside me for longer but he didn't like that because he feared the condom would break. I could already see the look of concern on his face when I broke the kiss.

Lakhiwe: "To many, many more. I love you too, Liyema so much," I kissed him.

He laid me back on the bed again and broke our physical oneness. He

laid next to me and kissed me. I brushed his face while he closed his eyes. I know that many other challenges lie ahead and we will have to overcome a lot of we want to celebrate more anniversaries. I just pray that we are strong enough to deal with what life throws at us. I don't see myself going through life with another life partner. He fell asleep and it indicated to me just how tired he really is. I know he wanted to stay awake almost all night but he has taken on a lot these past few weeks. I kissed his warm lips and his forehead.

May we someday celebrate an anniversary surrounded by our grandchildren.

FIFTY-NINE

LIYEMA

I ordered breakfast for Lala and I. I felt a bit nausea and had to down a bottle of cold water hoping it would help. It did for a few seconds but I felt sick again. I was not about to let it get me down though because I promised my wife a wonderful anniversary celebration. I hate that she has

to drive a pr-owned car but she loves it to bits. I thought I would be fresh and up all night for her last night but I did not even go beyond one round. Who gives their wife one round on their anniversary night? I went to the bed and gently got on it, she is still sleeping. Lala had this habit of slightly sleeping with her face down and I feared she'd suffocate but so far she has not. She's so beautiful. I just stared at her like a creep, appreciating the beauty before me. Life is so short. I just want us to stop and appreciate all that God has

blessed us with today. And I will start by appreciating the woman he chose for me. I kissed her face gently but she did not even move. I wanted her awake so I'd see that beautiful smile. I kissed every spot on her face before placing my lips on her. She kissed me back, finally she's awake. I broke the kiss only to look at closed eyes. She's not a morning person at all. I'm sure she's annoyed by me waking her up. She turned to face the other way. Does she really think I will let her off that easily? I hugged her from behind and kissed her neck.

She is naked under the covers and I'm planning to take full advantage of that. I continued to kiss her neck and slid my hands under the cover to cup and caress her soft breast. She let out a soft sensual moan but did not turn around so I need to up my game. I gently slid my hand between her thigh, they feel so warm and soft. I felt myself getting hard because her ass was against my manhood. I caressed her warm inner thighs and she opened them more slightly. So she is awake? She moved her curvy behind closer to my manhood and

I'm sure she could feel me go hard against her. She must know how much I craved her because she started to move her as in circular motions against me, her teasing was driving me crazy.

The way she moved was slow yet so lethal. I groaned in her neck. I loved the sensation so much but I remembered that I was the one who was suppose to lead this round. I gently put my hand on her love bud. It felt warm and is moist already. She wants me as much as I do. I worked my magic with my fingers and she said my name softly between moans. Her

arms wrapped around my neck and I continued planting soft kisses on her neck and shoulders. She opened her legs more and gave me full excess. I slid a finger in her and it drove her crazy. I worked my magic with my finger until she pleaded for me to replace my finger with my already throbbing manhood but I wanted to make her wait a bit. I continued until I felt her body tense and she clenched her thighs tight holding my hand prisoner until her orgasm subsided. She thought I was done but I was not. I put a condom on and placed her top leg over mine.

She tilted her head backwards and the look of love and lust was just amazing. I slid inside her warm folds and we moved at a very lazy rhythm before things got heated. I love making love her. Hearing her moans and knowing that I do that to her it amazing. She came first and her legs were shaking, I love it when that happens and it made me cum right after her. I held her while we shared the beautiful moment. Liyema: "Good morning," I said softly.

Lakhiwe: "I love you, Liyema," she said and looked at me. "Good

morning to you too, baby," she turned to face me.

Liyema: "I love you too even with your morning breath," she laughed softly.

Lakhiwe: "Did you get me a toothbrush?" she asked.

Liyema: "In your bag. Mahlubi packed some clothes she thought you'd like to wear. You did not even notice some of your clothes are gone," we both laughed.

Lakhiwe: "How would I have, baby when I was plotting all kinds of things for you. Let me go brush my teeth. I will be back,"

she got up and walked to the bathroom.

Liyema: "So we no longer cuddle after sex?," I joked and laughed.

Lakhiwe: "It's what a year of marriage does, my love," we both laughed.

Liyema: "What? Hell no, come here," she ran to the bathroom.

I watched her chocolate self disappear into the bathroom. I followed her and found her brushing her teeth. I set the water temperature of the shower to my liking because Lala likes her showers hot and I'm not

about that life. I let her finish brushing her teeth and carried her into the shower. I took the shower scrub and gel. I started to wash her body. We did turns to wash each other but I'm taller so she could not reach my upper back. I had to put her on my back so she would wash there and we both laughed at the silliness. We stood under the water and let it flow down our bodies rinsing the soap from our bodies. I kissed her and went my way down to kiss and show love to one of my favorite spots. She had one leg over my shoulder while leaning on the wall

for balance. I did my magic until she could not hold on any longer. I went up and kissed her forehead. She kissed my lips and neck. She was about to go lower but I stopped her.

Liiyema: "Lala, we spoke about this please," she looked down.

Lakhiwe: "We can use a condom, Liyema," she said quietly. I love her but I will not let her preform oral pleasure on me.

Liyema: "The pleasure is just not the same and there is no way in hell I'll let you do it without protection. Let's get out and get

ready for the day. I want you to take me on a mini road trip today. We need to test your car," I said excitedly.

Lakhiwe: "Okay," she said while taking a towel and stepping out of the shower. I don't know how many of these moments we have had. She dried her body and put her body butter on. "Lakhiwe," I said softly hoping she'd look at me but she went to her bag.

Lakhiwe: "The jean you packed is small, I've gained weight," she said while searching for something else. I took her hand

and held her close. I look at her first.

Liyema: "Lala, I'm sorry about the limits my status put on our sexual life," her eyes teared up. "Baby," I added.

Lakhiwe: "I'm sorry. I know you told me that you don't like it before," I kissed her.

Liyema: "Are you kidding me? I want us to explore any fantasies we have together and dammit I would love...I'm sorry but I just don't like receiving oral sex with a condom on and I do not think the

moment will be pleasant for you either,"

Lakhiwe: "I understand. Where do you want to go today?" she wiped her tear off and smiled.

Liyema: "Talk to me," I looked at her. I don't want this to come up again later in the day.

Lakhiwe: "I understand, Liyema," she kissed me. "I think I need to go back to gym," she changed the subject.

Liyema: "I'll renew your membership," she kissed me. "But your body is beautiful already," she smiled.

Lakhiwe: "Thank you, baby. Let us decide on the destination for the road trip while on the road because I have a feeling we will talk about it and go no where,"

Liyema: "Because you are indecisive. I got us breakfast but I'm sure its cold now and I kind of ate some," she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I would have been more shocked had you not. We can get something on the way. When will we checkout?,"

Liyema: "Lets spend another night. I'm not ready for reality,"

She kissed me and things got heated again. My wife rode me like no one's business and I loved each second. We got ready to go out and the nauseous feeling I had earlier returned. It was worse this time because I ended up vomiting. I think my treatment is giving me side effects again and I hated that it made my wife worry so much. I told her I don't need a doctor. I do not want this day to get ruined. We went out into the beautiful weather and she kissed and hugged her car when she saw it again. It fits her short self

perfectly but looks too small for me. She said we now have a car to go on date nights. She even kissed the inside. I think she has a fifth baby now. One I'm sure the boys won't be allowed to play with. She drove to her favorite spot and we had junk for breakfast, well she did. I could not stand the smell of the food. I'm coming down with something but I will deal with it tomorrow. I promised her a great time and I'm not going to break the promise.

LAKHIWE

Liyema thinks I do not know him well enough to see that he is not okay. After a year of marriage he should give me some credit. My husband hates being sick with passion. He is actually the one in the house who rarely gets sick while the boys and I get flu and allergies. He assured me he is fine but when I see him get worse I will drag him to the doctor. He kept saying that he wants to appreciate me as much as he can today. Tomorrow is another day. Sure we won't have alone time but he can appreciate me at our house with our kids present too.

I'm not angry about the oral sex issue. I just hate that it's not the first time I've gotten upset about him not allowing me to do it. I don't mind trying with a condom. I have never performed oral on a man but I want to so badly with him, so badly. He would like it too, he said it himself. I wish he used a condom when he was married to his first wife but it is too late for wishful thinking. I absolutely love my car. I love the exterior and interior. No baby vomit and food will ever be spilled in this car. This one is mine and I might give Liyema a ride every

now and then. He said his treatment is making him have side effects again but refused to start at the doctor first. I had a feeling that we should go just in case so I drove to the doctor, he was not happy about it at all. It was a walk-in doctor so we did not need an appointment and it was empty. He got helped immediately. I went in with him because I know he won't tell the doctor his symptoms. He will dilute his symptoms. The doctor examined him and asked him what he ate last night. The doctor said he might have eaten something

that upset his system. He got given pills and we were on our way.

Liyema: "Happy for wasting so much of our time when we could have been checking the wine lands by now?," he looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "Yes, I am happy. The wine lands are not more important than you. Stop being such a man," he laughed.

Liyema: "Okay, baby. So Robin Island?," he suggested.

Lakhiwe: "No, baby. What about that would be romantic? I was thinking Kirstenbosch Garden and

perhaps table mountain and then go back to the hotel to shower and change before we go on a date night at V&A Waterfall. Will that be within our budget?," he smiled and nodded. I drove to Table Mountain. "Tell me why we are not sleeping at home again seeing as the kids are not there?" he laughed loudly.

Liyema: "Geez, allow a man to be romantic please," we both laughed. "I just wanted us to in our little love bubble today. I feel like I have not given you any attention in a long while. Plus you

might have done laundry when home, so hell no," I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "You won't be saying that when you don't have a clean shirt for church tomorrow,"

Liyema: "I'll wash the collar a few hours before I wear it," I laughed.

Lakhiwe: "Sies, baby man. No what will people say? But don't worry, you have a few clean ones that just needs to be ironed,"

Liyema: "You look sexy while driving your care, baby," he whistled and I blushed.

Lakhiwe: "I nearly drove into a tree due to blushing. Your charms will kill us," we laughed.

Liyema: "Even if I die today, I'd go having know what true love is," he looked at me. I hated the way he said it so much.

Lakhiwe: "Well lucky for you your wife is a good driver so no dying for any of us, not today,"

Liyema: "I love you, Lala. You drive fast though. No wonder the boys look nervous when they see you are behind the wheel," I laughed o much.

Lakhiwe: "I get them home from their destination safe so I don't know why they look bewildered. We should also make time to go to the beach,"

Liyema: "I don't have coins on me," I looked at him.

Lakhiwe: "What?"

Liyema: "I'm a twin so I grew up being told that I should throw in a coin before getting into the water. Lulo and I did it all the time and I still do. I actually throw a coin when we go to the beach with the boys," I looked at him briefly while looking at the

road ahead. "Don't look at me like that. I thought you knew since you are a rural girl, baby,"

Lakhiwe: "I have never seen you do it, Liyema. Stop lying," we both laughed.

Liyema: "Then you learned something new about me today, my love,"

Lakhiwe: "The poor fish die after swallowing those things,"

Liyema: "Well I have no choice,"

Lakhiwe: "What happens if you don' do it?"

Liyema: "Makhulu said we might drown. Come on, baby it can't be

the first time you hear this,"

Lakhiwe: "It actually is,"

Liyema: "Also apparently when one twin dies the other will follow too because the one on the other side is lonely without their twin," his words left a chilling feeling on my back. I hated it.

Lakhiwe: "Okay, no beach then and no paranormal stuff either please. I even hate the tone you said it in,"

Liyema: "I'm sorry," he leaned closer to kiss my cheek.

We finally arrived at Table Mountain. We took the five

minute cable car up and it was an amazing experience. I've been in Cape Town for years but have never gotten to see it. Liyema said we should first start with a guided tour and this place is breathtakingly beautiful. We took so many pictures and strangers were kind enough to take pictures of us. My hubby got me an ice cream and got himself some juice. We took in the beautiful view of Cape Town while on top of the mountain. He held me so tightly while we quietly looked at the view. We stood like that for a while and stole some kisses too. A

guy came to greet us. He gave us pictures while we held each other. He took them without us even realizing and they were beautiful. He had one of those cameras that print pictures out immediately. Liyema took out money to pay him but he said it's a gift. We looked at the two pictures. He even captured one of our stolen kisses. Oh but God's people are everywhere though. After we enjoyed Table Mountain I drove to the Kirstenbosch Gardens and wow it was beautiful. We took a walk while holding hands. He carried me on

his back too. The day went by so quickly. I decided against the beach. I have coins but I'm still freaked out by what he said. How have I never realized that he puts coins in the water first even with our children? Maybe because it's the last thing I thought someone would do. We went back to the hotel and shared several steamy rounds before we went to shower and get ready for dinner. It has been the best day so far. It was a warm night so I'm glad Hlubi packed me more dresses than pants. We drove to the V&A Waterfront. When we are driving

together, Liyema always prefers to do the driving but not today. He has been a happy passenger. I guess he wants me to enjoy my gift. He held on to his chest just as we were about to walk to one of the restaurants.

Liyema: "I think I overdid it at gym yesterday,"

Lakhiwe: "Lets get our money's worth by going back to the hotel and getting room service. I'm not in the mood for people anyway,"

Liyema: "Liar. You love people.

Come lets go in before they take our favorite table," he opened his door and stepped out. I took my

bag and went out too. He held my hand while we walked inside. We got inside the place and found our spot empty. We have had date nights here before. He was about to stand to wash his hands but he lost his balance while holding his chest. I stood quickly to help him back in his seat. The waiter ran to us to ask if we are okay and I said no but Liyema said yes. Lakhiwe: "Please help me get him in the car. I'm driving you to hospital, Liyema," I said. I was not asking.

Liyema: "Okay," I knew something was wrong when he did not even

object to me taking him to hospital.

The two men got him in the car and asked if I'll be able to drive. I'm scared and worried but I prefer to take him myself. Like he said, I tend to speed. I drove off. I unbuttoned his shirt all the way when I stood at the robots. He is struggling to breath. I finally got to the hospital and went inside to go ask for help to get him in. The staff ran out with me and took him inside. I went to park the car since I stood at the ambulance spot. I quickly run inside. They had taken

him in already. I sorted out the paperwork and asked what was going on but no one could answer. A young nurse came out and asked if Liyema is taking any medication. I took out his treatment and the pills that he got earlier on. She ran back inside with them. I called Mma to tell her that I'm at the hospital and they need to come as soon as possible. We have been through so much already and I thought we would get a break for a while. It was even difficult to pray because I was so worried. I sat and waited for someone to tell me what is going on. The

family found me still sitting. I told them what was going on and we were all worried. The kids are with Hlubi but she called me and told me all will be fine. Finally a nurse came out and I went to her. I have not shed one tear because my husband is no weakling, he is just exhausted. Mma: "We have been waiting here for a long time. Tell us what is wrong," she demanded. The nurse looked like she would get in trouble if she told us.

Nurse: "I'm sorry...He had a heart attack but I can't say more until the doctors are done

with him. I need to get back in," she ran back. I sat down and I did not cry.

Lungi: "He is the healthiest person I know. No way he could have a damn heart attack," he went after the nurse but got stopped.

Mma: "She did not say he is dead so there is still hope. Let us pray," she said.

Lakhiwe: "I want to see him, not pray,"

Mma: "In times of trouble you pray for all of us so do the same for him too please," she pleaded.

Lakhiwe: "The things Liyema spoke today, Mma and he was clingy and you know he is not a clingy person,"

She held my hands in hers and prayed. Mma was not one to pray but she did. Neither of us cried either. Lungi was the one panicking the most and my own calmness freaked me out. I said a silent prayer alone. A heart attack? Of all things he got a heart attack? I thought those were for old people. What could have caused it? Is the exhaustion finally taking a toll on him? Did I cause it by making him

go out and be on his feet all day
even after we went to a doctor?
Hlubi called to ask how he is doing
and we had no answers for her.
Lungi was losing his mind with
each second that passed. I guess
he feared his brother would go
and he would have to be
responsible for the family. He had
better not die on me after he
promised me many more
anniversaries. Why am I so calm?
Why am I not crying? My reaction
is as odd as hearing that my
hubby just had a heart attack
because he really is healthier
than all of us combined. I stood

and walked up and down the passage, he has not even seen his gift so that heart of his better not test me. I took my heels off and walked on the cool floor without shoes. I still had no tears, not a single one.

SIXTY

LAKHIWE

4Hours, 50Minutes and 19 seconds. That is how long I sat while waiting to hear what is happening with my husband. I was offered food and water but I wanted non of that. I wanted to

see him. Mma has been trying to keep strong for me but her eyes tell me everything. They had fear in them, lots of fear. A fear of hearing that her child has died. Lungi offered me his jacket but I didn't want it. I wore Liyema's shirt that I took off before he went in. I still shed no tears and I do not know why. One of the doctors I saw ran in with him came out. Mma and Lungi jumped up. I stood and slowly walked to him. I was dragging my feet because I have not worn shoes since I've come here. They were ice cold and slightly numb. I could

see the look of frustration on Mma's face because of my slow walking but she did not dare say anything. I finally reach them.

Doctor: he first took a deep breath and exhaled. "He went in cardiac arrest so his heart stopped..." he said more for sure but I went deaf so I couldn't hear.

I felt warm tears glide down my cheeks. I couldn't feel my legs either so I was in Lungi's arms for support while I went down to the floor. Liyema's shirt on me is big. I took my arms out of its sleeves and covered my upper body

and face with it. I could smell him, it was like I'm in his arms. I sat on the floor legs crossed, covering myself with my husband's shirt hoping I could just disappear. How could the heart that loved me just stop? Years with Bonga who did not care if I died like a dog. A year with my soulmate now this? How unfair is this life that we live in? Mma wanted to uncover my face but I was not ready to let my face out of his shirt, it has his scent. I pushed her away from me aggressively and watched her fall to the floor. I'm sorry that I

did it but I had no choice, she wanted to take me away from him and I'm not ready. I cried for raising my hand at my mother and because my home collapsed. I hid my face in his shirt again. Lungi attempted to pick me up but I fought. I fought until he got off me. Why won't they leave me alone? Mma tried her luck again by trying to take the shirt from my face but once again I put on a fight. This time I was not being dramatic, I just did not want to part with what's my husband's. Other hospital staff tried to hold me down. I was screaming and

crying while they held me. I was like a toddler throwing a tantrum at the mall while others watched. Mma kept on saying they won't take his shirt while crying too. "My baby, hold on to it but please just calm down" I heard her plead when my ears finally let sound back in. I didn't calm down. I couldn't calm down. I felt a prick on my shoulder. A few minutes after I felt my defenses get weak. The shirt slid from my shoulders and Lungi took it and kept it. I felt stripped. I sat in the hospital passage with people looking at me and I felt exposed.

I then went to sleep. I woke up with a pain in my leg. I was alone in the room but Mma came in. I remember everything that happened earlier on. I did not want to speak to her. I got off the bed but lost my balance because of the pain in my leg. I looked at it and I had a big purple spot on my leg.

Mrs E: "You hit it against a chair when you fought us off," she said but I kept quiet. "You've got some strength, my baby," she added.

Lakhiwe: "I want to see my husband," I said softly.

Mrs E: "Okay, let us go," she helped me up.

Lakhiwe: "And no one will give me any hassles with funeral preparation. I know him so I will arrange everything,"

Mrs E: "Okay when the time comes for that then no one will stand in your way. I'm sure I'll be dead by then because I see Liyema living until 100," she laughed. I looked at her. "You are not a widow. Had you waited for the doctor to finish talking before you reacted, you'd have heard him say Liyema went into cardiac arrest because of the heart

attack but they managed to save him because he had it while they were still busy with him so they managed to save him," I looked at her.

Lakhiwe: "Don't play with me, Mma," I said softly.

Mrs E: "Do you think I would have been this calm. I would have threatened to sue this entire hospital for not being able to save my son. They had to sedate you to calm you down. Come let me take you to him," she held my waist and I limped to where she led the way.

I don't know why I do not believe her. Maybe it's because they had us sit for hours not telling us what is wrong with him. Why did his heart stop? Lungi saw us and could not help but run to me to hug me. I've got the most amazing in laws ever. I feel like I'm one of the siblings when we are all together. Mma broke Lungi's hug and we made our way to Liyema's room. When we went in he was strapped to hospital machines. Mma explained that more tests are being done to determine what caused his heart attack and the cardiac arrest.

She also said he has a kidney infection. Was Liyema sick for a while and kept quiet about it? All these health complications could not have developed overnight, right? Mma sat me down on the chair next to the bed and hugged me before leaving the room. I looked at my husband for the longest time. He looks different, still handsome but different. I held his hand and the warmth of it made me bow my head to thank God that there is still life. I don't care what condition he wakes up in, I will be by his side even if this heart attack did

permanent damage. I promised him to be with him in bad health too but I'm happy that death has not yet parted us. I wish he could wake up even if it's just to say "Hi" and then sleep again. He is not in a coma but is on heavy medication. I kissed his hand and laid my head on it.

Lakhiwe: "Loving and fighting. Accusing, uniting. I can't imagine a world with you gone. The joy and the chaos, the demons we're made of. I'd be so lost if you left me alone. Can you hear me screaming "please don't leave me?" Hold on, I still want you. Come back, I still

need you. Let me take your hand, I'll make it right. I swear to love you all my life. Hold on, I still need you," I sang Chord Overstreet's "Hold On" to him slowly and softly hoping he hears me. This is music he introduced me to.

I'm no singer. In fact I sing out of tune a lot, even at church.

Before Liyema I only listened to local music but when I married him, he opened me up to different types of music. Hold on is a song I used to like while it played in the background as he washed the car or was just busy having his alone mom nets. I'm not even sure I

sang it right but I hope he hears me. I need him to hold on because I still need him. I looked up hoping he would have heard me and wake up but he was still asleep. I kissed his lips but unlike his warm hands, they were cool on mine. I put my head on his chest and could hear his heart beating slowly. I just stayed like that for a while. It can never stop again, never.

Lakhiwe: "And you light up my life. You give me hope to carry on. You light up my days and fill my nights with song. Rollin' at sea, adrift on the water. Could it be finally I'm

turnin' for home?. Finally a chance to say "Hey, I love you" Never again to be all alone," I sang Debbie Boone's "You light up my life". It's one of his favorite too but I'm sure I'm not singing it right. I always teased him and said he has white people music taste but I listen when he plays it.

I still had my head against his chest listening to his heart beat. That heart beats for so many of us and it can't stop again. I got up and started to walk around in his room while singing his favorite songs. I'm sure I'm hurting his

ears with my bad singing voice but he needs to know that I'm waiting for him to wake up. I would look at him when I end a song but his eyes were still closed. I sang his favorite church songs too. I know those well. I could still feel the pain in my leg but I still walked around his room singing. A nurse came in to check on him. I did not care if I look like a mad woman to her. I will annoy Liyema with my bad singing until he wakes up. Had I had any slippers I'd have dragged my feet while walking around. He can't stand that habit of mine.

The nurse left me singing while moving from one side of the room to the other. "I'd be so lost if you left me alone. Can you hear me screaming" please don't leave me?". I repeatedly sang those lines over and over again while still moving. My leg was in pain but I sang those lines from "Hold On" over and over again.

LIYEMA

I sat with Lulonke on the green grass. I've never seen such green grass in my life and there were flowers all over the place. It was like a forest but a garden forest if that even makes sense and

Lulonke held my hand since we entered it and I walked with her because I've missed her. We sat down because I have a pain in my chest. It came suddenly because I felt nothing since I met Lulo at this place. My sister touched my chest and told me the pain would end if we keep on walking. She has not aged one bit. Still the beautiful young teenager I last saw. It feels good to be with her. "I'd be so lost if you left me alone. Can you hear me screaming" please don't leave me?", Lala sang but from afar. I know it is her because I know her singing. It is

terrible but she loves singing. The pain in my chest became more intense. Lala sang that line again and again. Why would she think I'd leave her alone? My eyes searched for her but all I could hear was her singing. Lulo looked at me. She smiled, kissed my forehead and told me she loves me. I love her too but it sounded like she was saying goodbye.

Lulo: "Go," she said while pointing backwards. What? I didn't want to leave her alone. I thought Lala would surely follow behind and find us. Her voice sounded close. I'm sure she just took a

wrong turn in the garden and got lost but she will come and we can take a walk with Lulonke. I shook my head saying no to Lulo chasing me away from this beautiful place. "Go, Liyema," she repeated I shook my head quickly this time. "Go!" she shouted again but this time her face turned from beautiful into one filled with blood and glass pieces. It scared me so much that I ended up passing out, it all went dark. I could still hear Lala singing. She repeated the same lines of "Hold On". I opened my eyes and heard beeping sounds mixed with Lakhiwe's

singing. She sounded tired. You know when you have been doing something for too long and it ends up wearing you down? She sounded like she had been singing for hours because she sounded out of breath too. What is going on? I hate how a beautiful dream of my sister turned into a nightmare. I tried to get up but my chest felt a bit tight. I looked around, I'm in hospital. I remembered what happened. The chest pain and struggling to breathe. I caught a glimpse of Laksiwe walking to the corner still singing. She disappeared from

my sight again but still sang only to appear again. She is walking from corner to corner singing. I have to stop her because she really did sound like one who is going to pass out while doing that. Something serious must have happened to me if she is singing a song pleading for me not to leave her. I had to get her attention somehow.

Liyema: "Forever seems like a..long time...," I started to sing Emily Hackett's "Take My Hand" softly. She ran to the side my head was turned to. She just froze looking at me while standing

far from me. "But nothing seems like a long time when I'm with you. I feel like I'm walking on waters. Since the day that I asked your father. To let go of his daughter...So give me your blessing, sir. I'll give her all that...that I've got. It doesn't look like much. But it sure feels like a lot. Let her take my heart and take my hand. Take my heart and take my hand. Take my heart and take my hand again and again. Right where we stand. I've never really know what love is. But whatever it is I feel it in your kiss," I sang only until there

because I was starting to get out of breath. She still stood by the cabin that was in the room just looking at me. Can she see me? I smiled but she still just stood there and I was starting to worry. "Baby," I called out quietly.

She started to cry and sank to the floor slowly. She curled up against the cabin and cried. I tried to move to get to her but my body was not allowing me to. I wanted to hold her. Why won't she come closer? I pressed the device to call for help. A nurse

appeared soon after and I pointed to Lala.

Liyema: "Ple...please check on my wife," I said and the nurse ran to the floor to check on Lakhiwe.

Nurse: "Mam, are you okay? Should I call a doctor?" she asked. Lakhiwe shook her head.

Lakhiwe: "No, I...I'm okay that you, I just need a minutes," she said while sniffing. The nurse just nodded.

Nurse: "She will be fine, sir. It's just the joy of seeing you awake. I had the a similar reaction when my husband had a stroke three

years ago. Give her time, I will get your doctor and tell him you are awake" she smiled and left us alone again.

I forced myself to sit up though it was a bit painful, more discomfort than pain though. Any man who loves his wife will tell you that there is no greater pain than watching your wife cry and you can do nothing about it. Its even worse when you are the reason behind her tears. I waited for her since I can't go to her. She finally put her hand on the wall behind her for balance and stood up slowly, her dress was up

revealing her thighs. She has a bruise and I wondered what happened. She wiped her tears off and looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "Did you hear me sing?," she asked softly. I smiled.

Liyema: "Come closer and I'll tell you," I pleaded. She walked to me slowly. "Can I have a kiss please," I added.

Lakhiwe: "I don't give kisses to people who made me believe they died," she said.

Liyema: "I'm so...," her lips were on mine before I could finish. She broke the kiss and cried while her

face was still against mine. I held the back of her neck and kissed her again. "I promised you so much. I promised to annoy you for a good couple of years. I promised to be at your graduation. I promised you the wedding of your dreams. A new car, home renovation but most importantly to love you more with all the years we will be together. Not a year, years. I would not leave you with four boys, four damn boys whom I know would have given you hassles when I'm not there when they reach puberty. I don't think life would be so cruel as to

deprive us of more years together. I'm here and yes I heard you scream "please don't leave me". I heard you sing loud and clear," I said while crying and took shallow quick breaths.

She got on the bed and got on top of me. I don't think she thought it through because I'm still hurting a bit but I let her hold me. I let her feel that I'm alive. I listened to her soft sobs while her face was in my neck. A doctor came in and he look concerned that my wife was on top of me while I'm connected to his machines but I raised my hand to tell him not

to move her. She is heavy today but only because I'm weak but I'll allow her to let go herself. She noticed the hospital staff's presence in the room and quickly pulled herself together. She got off the bed and apologized. The doctor told her not to worry. I held on to her hand.

Liyema: "What happened to me? Please don't use big medical terms I won't understand," I looked at the doctor.

Doctor: "When your wife came in with you, you had suffered a heart attack but soon went into cardiac arrest. It was sudden but

fortunately you were already in our care when it happened so we managed to get your heart beating after a few seconds. It's not likely for cardiac arrests to occur after a heart attack but your wife drove you here quick. Had your your heart stopped while elsewhere, we could be speaking a totally different thing right now," he said. I took Lala's hand and kissed it. Her high speed driving paid off. "You also have kidney infection but nothing serious as of yet and we hope it will remain that way,"

Liyema: "Can I go home?"

Doctor: "Not yet, Mr Elephant. Maybe in a few weeks or so,"

Liyema: "So what caused all of this. I don't smoke, drink and I eat clean most times. What happened? What should I stop in order for this to never happen again?"

Doctor: "For now Your treatment. Are you comfortable with discussing your health issues in front of your wife?" he asked. What kind of a question is that?

Liyema: "She knows about my status so you may carry on. Why should I stop my treatment

because I'm assuming you're referring to my HIV treatment," the doctor nodded.

Doctor: "It appears that it is the cause of this because it undermines your immune system which can lead to your organs failing, How long have you taken them?"

Liyema: "Over four years," he looked at the nurse and they both had a strange look on their faces.

Doctor: "We tested you, Mr Elephant and we found no trace of HIV antibodies in all the tests we ran,"

Liyema: "Well yeah that is because the treatment has been working well. My viral load is undetectable. Surely you should know that," I looked at him.

Doctor: "You do not understand, sir. We found absolutely no trace of HIV in your blood or any other samples taken. We sent your blood to three different labs but they found the same thing. It seems you were misdiagnosed but that is not likely to happen unless your blood sample got mixed up with another person's but even then they should have noticed soon after and corrected their

mistake," he said sounding sure. I looked at Lala and we were both confused.

Liyema: "But I go for my viral load tests and CD4 Count checks as told and my doctor picked nothing up,"

Nurse: "How credible is your doctor? Who is he?" he asked. Is he kidding me? Would I go to a bogus doctor?

Liyema: "Dr Bancroft," I said calmly.

Doctor: "He is a great doctor so I do not know what the explanation behind this could be. We will run

more tests but I'm certain that you have been misdiagnosed and have been taking treatment for a virus you don't have for years and the effects are starting to show. When a person is HIV Positive the drugs make their immune system strong. With you it makes it weak because you don't have the virus. I'm surprised after so many years you are only here now. Your organs were starting," he looked at me. I do not understand. Laksiwe: "Are you able to prevent that from happening, the organ failure?"

Doctor: "We are waiting for the

other test results to see the extent of the damage. For now I'm taking you off the HIV treatment," he looked at me.

Liyema: "No, no, I don't want that," I shook my head.

Lakhiwe: "Liyema they are making you sick," she looked at me.

Liyema: "Stopping will make me sicker, baby. I can't stop the treatment," I looked at the doctor.

Doctor: "Well as your doctor I say you will because it is in your best interest. I won't keep feeding my

patient something that might be kill him. Please excuse me while I go call Dr Bancroft and ask him for your file. I will come around later when I have more answers," he said and walked out. The nurse stayed and went on about her business. I asked her to explain to me again and she explained it as they did a few minutes ago but I was still confused. So many years of taking these pills and having to take the crappy side effects that came with it, I'm told it might all have been for nothing? The nurse left

after examining me. Lala stood closer and looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "Let us wait for the other tests he spoke about but for now let us trust them," she said.

Liyema: "Nothing makes sense, Lala. I have been going for check ups and you have seen the reports on some of those,"

Lakhiwe: "Maybe you doctor made a mistake. He is an old man, baby,"

Liyema: "For so many years, baby? A mistake of so many years?"

These people are the ones who

have it wrong. I've been with my doctor for years. The man used to give me sweets after a check up when I was a boy. I have never went to another doctor. Even when he was not around I'd wait for him to return that's how much I trust him. These people are just messing with my emotions right now. If I don't take my treatment then this virus will really show my damn immune system hell," I raised my voice while taking quick breaths. Lakhiwe: "Okay I hear you and you have a point but please calm down. Your heart is still fragile.

They said it can take months to recover from a heart attack and I do not want you having another again," I heard the fear in her voice. I would not want to hurt her and scare her again so I calmed myself down.

I asked her to get on top of the bed again. I moved a bit to make space for her. I held her and decided not to concern myself with the hospital's mistake and asked my wife how she injured her leg and she told me. She looked at me without saying a word and I got lost in her red, swollen eyes. My poor wife has been through a lot.

The worry about losing me and raising four kids alone must have taken its toll on her. Mma and Lungi came in and they looked happy to see me.

Lungi: "You two must have had a damn rough anniversary if you ended up here with a heart attack," he laughed.

Mma: "Hey! This is not the time," we actually laughed it off.

I told them what the doctor said and they looked confused too. Mma took Lakiwe to the corner of the room to talk alone. It seemed they were having a serious

discussion. Mma came back saying I should go to different doctors just to confirm. There was no need for that. I'm not HIV negative. I will not even entertain the idea of that possibility after I've spent years coming to terms with my status. I'm just waiting for these doctors to tell me they made a mistake, apologize, tell me when I can go home to my family so I can go on with life. I said a silent prayer of thanks. I thanked God for not allowing Lala to be a young widow. I thanked Him for not allowing my boys to know me

by pictures only. I thanked Him for sparing my life because I know my grandmother would have had a heart attack of her own and died too had I died. I thank Him because there is so much I still need to do. The devil would not be the devil if he did not attempt to break hearts even on happy occasions but I do serve a living God.

SIXTY-ONE

MLUNGISI

I've been in Maputo since I went into hiding running from the

consequences of a crime I did not commit. I hated that Zingisa had me by the balls with her threats and I agree the thought of killing her crossed my mind a few times but I did not do it. Someone has messed up with my life and so far I have not been able to find out who. I don't know how I feel about Zola's ill mannered daughter. When I told her to have the abortion, it was not because I did not want any kids but I was not ready back then. All the money was going to my studies and to have had a baby would have meant I should drop

out of university. My father was a strict man. Had he known that I impregnated a girl he would not have paid for my fees and would have told me to go work like the man I am since I can father children. Had we had the baby we would not have had the money we have. I would most probably have been a retired, sick miner like Liyema's father in law. My children would not have gone to the best schools and we would have lived poorly. I do not regret choosing my future over the child because when I was ready to have children I was able to

provide for them. I only had one daughter and that was my baby girl Lulongke. I love my sons but they knew Lulo was extra special and that is why I have not been able to forgive Liyema for her death. I pretend to be okay with it but deep down I still hate my son for having my baby girl killed. Had he just woken me up, I would have went to pick Lulo up myself. Sure I would have grounded her for sneaking out but my anger would not have lasted. Her loss is one that I was never able to get over. I was more attentive and kinder when she was around. It is

safe to say she had me wrapped around her little finger. This daughter will never replace my Lulo and her swearing at me proved they are two different people. I would like to meet her though and teach her manners. None of my children has called me shit. I know the boys have thought it but they never dared to say it because they know elders are to be respected. It is clear this child was not raised by me.

A month ago I got admitted to a care center for HIV positive and TB patients. I fell terribly ill and a friend who has been helping me

settle brought me here. It has been a month of hell. One of my side women did tell me to go test years ago after she tested positive but I was too proud to admit that I, Mlungi Elephant could have such a disease in my blood. I brushed it off and it was only when I started losing weight and coughing blood that I was forced to seek help. Jimmy, my friend came with a cellphone. I have been too sick and ashamed to call Zola to tell her I'm in a health care facility that is not even in top condition. I dialed her number and it rang for a long time.

Zola: "Hello?," she answered. I kept quiet. "Is anyone there?," she asked. "Look I have better things to do with my time...,"

Mlu: "Zozo, it's me," I finally said and coughed for a few seconds.

Zola: "Mlungisi, will you ever show concern for your children? Lulonke was not your only child, dammit," she shouted.

Mlu: "Nozolile, please do not start,"

Zola: "Do not tell me that. Mahlubandile has been going...,"

Mlu: "Who is that?" I asked and she laughed out loud.

Zola: "Had you not stopped calling, you would have known it's your first born,"

Mlu: "Oh," I said softly.

Zola: "Not even a single phone call to hear how I'm recovering, Mlungi. All because Hlubi said things out of anger? You have not called to ask how our child is doing since she had such a painful upbringing. Not so long ago Liyema had a heart attack and his heart stopped," she said and my heart started to beat fast.

Mlu: "Is Liyema dead?" I asked. I don't want one of my heirs to

die especially not the most responsible one.

Zola: "Wouldn't you just love that because it would be one less person to care about," she said sarcastically.

Mlu: "I don't care what you think of me but I do not want any of my children to die. How is he? How bad is it?,"

Zola: "Well Liyema cheated death to be with his family, you on the other hand could not care less about yours. We have been doing well without you," her words cut deep. I'm the family anchor. How could life go on without me?

Mlu: "Do you have another man?"

Zola: "Goodbye, Mlungisi," she wanted to end the call but I pleaded with her not to.

Mlu: "I'm sorry. I just miss you so much. I'm sick, Zola," I said.

Zola: "What is wrong with you? I hope you are not making a big deal out of a mild flu," she shouted.

Mlu: "Is shitting your own pants a mild flu, Nozolile?!" I shouted without thinking. There was silence on the other line. "I'm weak and I'm as thin as a toothpick right now. I tested

positive for HIV," I added but she still kept quiet.

Zola: "Well then die," she said with such hatred in her voice. "I have started treatment for something that you gave me just because you do not know what a damn condom is and how it is used. Do you know the headaches and the nauseous I get as side effects? I will have to take these damn pills for the rest of my life because of you and you want me to cry because the virus you gave me is eating at your body? What did you expect from me, Mlungisi?" she asked.

Mlu: "I just want you to know that I'm sorry and I regret everything that happened, Nozolile," I said in a whisper. I did not want either of us to get sick.

Zola: "Your sorry will not make me HIV free. I don't care if you get thinner by day and end up disappearing, you did it to yourself,"

Mlu: "I know that but I want to make things right. I want to come home, if I die, I want it to be in my house,"

Zola: "Then go to your house. Its standing empty anyway because my child and I are at my sister's since it sounded like you did not want her in your house when I told you I'm taking her home. Go to your house, I'm not standing in your way,"

Mlu: "What happened to that loving wife who would do anything to support her husband?,"

Zola: "She remembered who she was before she married her weak, goof for nothing husband. I used to be so independent and was able to think for myself until I met you and you made me feel like I'm

nothing compared to you intellectually," she said. I could not believe my wife was speaking to me like that. It sounded like she is saying that I married a copy of her, not her true self and that another woman hides underneath the soft spoken, kind supportive woman I married. Did Zola pretend to be someone else so I would marry her? I suddenly felt like I did not know her. Well her hiding a child from me for over thirty years proves there are things about her I know nothing about.

Mlu: "Please help me to return home. I don't think that I will be able to live longer than a few months,"

Zola: "Even if I wanted to help, how do you think I would do that? You are a wanted man, Mlungisi. I'm not going to risk going to jail for you,"

Mlu: "I did not kill that woman, Zola! Dammit you don't know what that girl made me do to keep this damn secret," I shouted.

Zola: "So you mean to tell me that you did give into her threats?"

What did you do for this girl, Mlungisi?"

Mlu: "It does not matter, she is dead. Just try to get me help. I'm running out of money and soon they might even kick me out here," I pleaded.

Zola: "Tell me and I will help,". I can't tell her. She will never forgive me.

Mlu: "I gave her money...lots of it," I lied.

Zola: "Bye, I'm no fool you can just lie to. That girl's father was way richer than you. Money was not something she needed nor wanted.

What she wanted from you was Liyema. Go lie to a damn fool," she shouted.

Mlu: "Wait! Okay I'll tell you the truth," I said. She did not say anything but I could hear her breath. "Promise that you will help me after I tell you and that you will put yourself in my shoes,"

Zola: "If you tell me the truth I will try. Don't dare lie again. I will end this call for real this time, I promise," I knew she meant each word. I've lied to her so much but not once has she caught on. Who is this new woman and what has she done to my wife? I want my

naive Zola back not this FBI agent who is also a human lie detector. If I lie to her she will cut all contact with me forever and I need her because I want to go home. "Mlungisi, I want to go see my son in hospital do not waste my time, talk now," she demanded. Who is this woman?

Mlu: "I did something terrible but I had no choice. I was not thinking straight because of fear and desperation,"

Zola: "Spare me the pity attempts,"

Mlu: "I slept with Zingisa a few months after she married Liyema so my affair with her was no lie. The lie was her HIV status and she made me a part of it. When Liyema filled for divorce she came to me to ask for my help to convince him not to but she never saw me that day because she turned around before she came in, at least that was what she said. Days later she came to me again with pictures of me with other women in compromising positions and a recording. On the recording was a conversation one of my side chicks and I were having where

this girl told me she tested positive for HIV and I should go too. Zingisa recorded that as insurance. She threatened to send you and the press the pictures of me and the women and the recording if I did not help her get Liyema back. And also said she will tell you all about us sleeping together. She knew she had no chance because she pushed him to far so she came up with a plan to try and manipulate him into taking her back. At first she did not know how to do it though but a day later she told me that she will say to Liyema she is HIV

positive and tell him to go test too and said that was where I come in. You know Liyema loved Bancroft since he was a child, and Zingisa knew he went to no other doctor. She told me to convince Bancroft to fake Liyema's results. Bancroft is fond of Liyema so he refused. Zingisa said that we needed to get dirt on him. I thought we would find nothing but she managed to find things. I guess even the innocent looking have skeletons in their closet. So I took her information to him and he had no choice but to do as asked. Zingisa then went to

lie to Liyema about her status after Bancroft agreed. Liyema went to Bancroft and yeah you know what happened. Bancroft has been continuing to do it because he knew the consequences of the truth coming out after he already helped us would be bad. He was going to lose his license and go to prison. I kept silent because I feared that you would find out that I not only slept with Zingisa but with several other women. I also did not want Liyema to hate me. Zingisa came back hoping to fix things with Liyema. She thought his anger

would have passed and that he would want her back since they were both supposedly HIV positive. She came up with this plan because she thought Liyema would stay with her since they were both supposedly HIV positive but he proved her wrong. When he told us about his status, I was not angry at him for being HIV positive, I was angry at myself for being a part of the people who made him believe he is when he never was," I confessed slowly.

Zola: "So you have known for so many years that you might have

HIV yet you continued to sleep with me?"

Mlu: "I did not believe that it was true, Zola and how would I have explained the sudden usage of a condom without risking you finding out? I have never tested before because I was in denial. It's only now that I got infected with TB that I also got my HIV results. I did not believe it was going to happen to someone as strong as me,"

Zola: *she screamed so loud I had to take the phone off my ear*. "My child almost died because you made him take pills that he was

not suppose to. You can hurt me, Mlungisi but you damn well know better than hurting my babies. You know I would move mountains for my babies. You nearly killed my son because you were afraid I'd find out what a rotten pig you are? Four years of taking things that were not meant for his body, Mlungisi. We spent money sending his blood to other labs out of town because he would not believe that he is negative because of you. Even now he does not believe. Do you realize the psychological effect this could have on my child? I'm HIV positive, I got a second,

third and fourth opinion and I know you infected me because you were the only man I slept with. I don't care about myself but you made my child believe he is sick for years?

Mlu: "And I regret it with everything in me," I said and meant it. I do regret it.

Zola: "How many other woman were you with?," she asked. I could hear the pain in her voice.

Mlu: "Several. I lost count,"

Zola: "So I insulted Zingisa saying she infected you but it turns out you are a dog that laid

everywhere and picked up fleaze from your female dogs and brought it to me? Hhoooo, Mlungisi Elephant, you'd be lucky if those deceases kill you before I get to you," she threatned. I knew it's just anger talking.

I was about to plead but the line went dead. I hate Zingisa. I wish I never allowed her in his life but they seemed compatible and they grew up together.

Together our families would have built empires. I know I don't have a family after I confessed. I infected my wife and made my son believe that he is infected. I

did sleep with my son's ex wife but I used condoms because the last thing I wanted was to impregnate my daughter in law. When I slept with all of those women, decease was not on my mind, only pleasure. Now I'm lying in a semi dirty care place not knowing if I will live. I'm even wearing an adult diaper before I don't make it to the toilet in time. It's degrading that a young girl has to change my diaper as if I'm a child. I was oping to go home so that Zola could do such since she knows my body. I wish I never allowed that girl in my son's

life and my bed. Truth is I was not faithful to Zola since before we got married right throughout our marriage. She found out about my infidelity once but not the others. I wish I was faithful to my wife and none of this would have happened. Now I have HIV and TB at the same time and my body is failing me. I know Zola will tell Liyema. I just need to call him and ask for his forgiveness before I die. I have a feeling that I will die alone, in a foreign land and be buried with strangers. My mother will not even get to lay me to rest and I

know my death might kill her.
The pastor who comes to pray for us came and I told him I confessed all my sins to my wife. He said it's a good thing because my soul will find peace. He spoke as if I'm dead already. He prayed for us as usual and I for the first time closed my eyes while he prayed. I do not want to die alone. I do not want to die period. I have always feared death and now it seems to be knocking wanting for me to invite it in but I am not ready.,

LIYEMA

I laid on my hospital bed and I'm tired of this place. I've been here for a week and I can't take it anymore. They kept telling me that the test still comes back negative and are withholding my treatment. I'm feeling myself get sick too and I'm sure it's because I'm not getting treatment.

Lakhiwe has been visiting each and every single day. I think she fears my heart will stop again.

The door opened and she appeared and my day suddenly got better. She held the door open and my four little soldiers walked in looking confused. I can move

now so I sat up and when they realized it's me on the bed they were all smiles and ran to the side of the bed. Lala put them all on the bed and I got tackled down, I've missed them so much. Soon the attention was on the machines and it was a mission to prevent them from touching them. When we stop the one the others do something naughty. There is never peace with them but when I'm not with them the chaos is what I miss most. Lala's leg is also better. Soon the siblings came and it was just chaos but fun chaos. We were

laughing and they already have heart attack jokes.

Hlubi: "You owe us for looking after your wife," she joked and we laughed.

Lakhiwe: "They were not looking after me, baby. When we are home I literally have six children," they laughed.

Liyema: "I'll be out of here soon, my baby. They will go to their mother's place," I kissed her.

Bukhosi held our faces to part us. He then held on to his mother all territorial. They do that

sometimes. "This is my wife. Get old and get your own," we laughed.

Lungi: "But on a serious note though, you scared us. Don't do that, man," he said in a shaky voice.

Liyema: "I'm still here so let us not think about anything else,"

Hlubi: "So about your status? Still don't believe the people here?"

Liyema: "No, and my doctor gave them my file and explained to them there was no mistake.

Baby, I'm discharging myself today," she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "No, Liyema please stop being stubborn, baby,"

Liyema: "These people don't know what they are doing?,"

Lungi: "But Bhut think about it, this is a team of people who say the same thing and you still believe one guy?"

Liyema: "Well a team of people can work together to fake files and results to. I learned that from the surrogacy experience," I blurted out and did not even think of how my wife will feel. I looked at her and she was looking down. "I did....,"

Lakhiwe: "It's okay," she said softly and faked a smile. It's not, I know her.

Lungi: "But they sent it to independent labs," he said but my attention was still on my wife who was pretending to be okay after what I said.

Mma: "They are right, Ndoda. You do not have HIV," she walked in and closed the door behind her.

Liyema: "Mma, not again,"

Mma: "I just spoke to your father and he said a few things. Please listen without interrupting me because this will not be easy

to say," Hlubi got out toys from her bag and gave it to the boys to keep them busy. She has taken her aunt role seriously. Mma sat down.

She held my hand and I knew something is wrong. Could my father want a divorce because he met someone else? I would not be surprised at all. She took a deep breath before talking. She told us what Ta told her. We indeed did not interrupt her because we were all speechless. How can a father be so cruel to his son? How could a husband be so cruel to his wife? To think that I respected

the man once upon a time. I wanted to be just like him but I'm glad I'm not made of the same material he is. And to have the nerve to ask my mother to make a plan to bring him home after he made her sick. I heard what she said regarding me but I did not care about myself at first. I asked her how she is.

Mma: "I'm okay. I started treatment after I got discharged from hospital. It still makes me sick but...but," she could not finish because she cried.

We all comforted her, even the boys gave her a hug. I hated

that they have to be around all these sad emotions. Lungi said he needed a moment and will take the kids with him for air. I was grateful to him for that. I knew he would not stay long. He has this carefree personality but he is the most sensitive.

Liyema: "Mma, if there is anyone who knows what it's like to accept your status is me, especially when you got it from someone you love who was unfaithful. It does not feel like it now but I promise it gets better. The side effects will pass I promise. I just wish you told me

when you found out and I would have helped you deal with things. We will be okay, you will see," I held her hand.

Mma: "I know, Ndoda. I just hate your father right now. I want to heart him so bad. The things I'm plotting in my mind would make the devil hide out of fear," she said with anger.

Hlubi: "I hated him from word go, good for nothing piece of sick shit," we all just looked at her. When you look at her one would never say she swears but Hlubi swears like no other.

Liyema: "He is not worth your time, Mma. We are all here, so let us build this family. I actually think we have been happier without him. Yes, we have had bad, bad days but I imagine the nightmares would have been worse had he been here. Hlubi would most probably want nothing to do with us. So without him we make progress and I will not fail in looking after you all," I looked at all of them.

Hlubi: "I know we don't say this but so far you have been a great family leader. Thank you, Lee," she smiled. "I have never met

men as kind as you and Lunile and the fact that you are my brothers make it all so much sweeter. Thank you for changing my view on men," she brushed my arm.

Mma: "Let us leave you and Khiwe. I'm sure you two want to talk about the what I told you. Let us go help Lungi, Mahlubandile," she stood. "I love you," she kissed my forehead.

Liyema: "I love you too," I smiled. They walked out and closed the door behind them. I looked at me wife who has been quiet for way

too long. "Please join me on the bed," she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "We are in a hospital, baby. Next thing you have another heart attack due to the excitement," she said while looking at the door and I laughed.

Liyema: "I just want to hold you. What did you think I mean?"

Lakhiwe: "Nothing," she said and got on the bed.

Liyema: "Get your mind out of the gutter, Mrs Elephant," she just looked at me. "I'm sorry about what I said earlier, okay. I

should not have said it," I kissed her.

Lakhiwe: "Apology accepted. Now can we talk about the elephant in the room," I laughed because it sound weird since my surname is Elephant

Liyema: "I'm the elephant in the room," I said. "But on a serious note, I don't know how I'm feeling about this thing about my status. How are you feeling about it?"

Lakhiwe: "I just don't like that your father played with your life like this. What he did is the reason why you are here today.

You could have died, baby. I hate that he is our children grandfather. Such evil.

Liyema: "We will take it one day at a time,"

Lakhiwe: "I knew about Mma's status by the way. I'm sorry for not telling you," I kissed her.

Liyema: "It's okay. No one has a right to disclose another person's status. Now I just need to let the law deal with Dr Bancroft. I can't believe he agreed to do it. Wow, I'm not HIV positive. It's strange," I said softly.

Lakhiwe: "So we won't have to use protection anymore?," she smiled.

Liyema: "Yeah," I smiled back but it was a forced smile.

I don't know about that. I can't picture myself having sex with her without a condom. Not because I don't want to but in my mind I'm still HIV positive so I'll still worry about infecting her though I heard I'm negative. I've imagined how it would feel to be with Lala without protection for so long. I've even had a dream about it once or twice. I should be excited that 'm told that I can

but I'm more afraid than excited. Afraid they might say it is an April fool's joke though it's not even April. That Ta will call and say "oh I was just messing up your lives more the story I told your mother was not true" after I've been one with my wife without a condom only to hear that she is sick because of me. I will continue having sex with Lala with a condom. It might disappoint her but I don't believe this. I have a pig for a father who does not care about us. I will make sure my boys know that I would do anything for them. I will

have to be Mma's biggest support because no one understands more than me what it is like to come to terms with your status but she will be okay.

SIXTY-TWO

LIYEMA

I've been back from hospital for a while now. I think I'm recovering quicker now while at home than when I was at hospital. Perhaps it's because I'm surrounded by my loved ones. I'm able to do some things but not everything until I've recovered.

I'm taking a week or two off from work which was doctor's orders. Fortunately I've got a competent team who know what they are doing. They have also been coming to the house for brainstorming and meetings. I appreciate them all so much. The boys on the other hand don't understand that daddy is recovering. It seems their roughness have gone up a notch since I've been discharged. I'm once again forced to leave most things to Lakhiwe but I don't want to seem like a useless husband so I help her with the

little chores around the house. We have not had sex since I've come home for recovery reasons. I miss her so much but she is following doctor's orders. When she and the boys have left to go to daycare and university I'm left to sit at home and do nothing which works on my nerve but I want to recover soon so I'll do as I'm told for now. Luckily it's Saturday today and we decided to go on a picnic. I could hear Lala lose her patience upstairs while getting the boys ready. I was packing a basket but walked up to check. I found four white boys because

they somehow got a hold of their moisturizer. I helped my wife to let them know that what they did is wrong but we both ended up laughing at our "ghosts".

Lakhiwe: "I left them for a minute, baby and came back to this," she pointed at the boys who were not bothered.

Liyema: "How did they get to this stage so quickly? Not so long ago they couldn't even walk,"

Lakhiwe: "Please take two and I'll do so too to get them cleaned up quickly,"

We each cleaned two and even then they made it hard for us to clean them. My phone rang and it was closer to Lala so I asked her to answer it. I was tickling my boys while I wiped the skin moisturizer off. I loved how they flashed those tiny teeth when they laughed. I looked at Lakhiwe whose facial expression changed which made me wonder who was on the other side of the line. She walked closer to me and gave me my phone.

Lakhiwe: "It's your father, baby" she said softly. I took the phone from her hand but did not put it

on my ear. "He says he is dying," she added.

Liyema: "Thanks, baby," she nodded and gave her attention to the boys. I placed the phone against my ear. "What do you want?," I asked the man who has done nothing but ruin my life since I was a child.

Ta: "Thank you for taking my call, son," he said. I've never heard my father say thank you. "Liyema, are you still there?" he asked softly. He did sound weak.

Liyema: "I don't have anything to say to you so I'm listening,"

Ta: "Thank you for being willing to listen to me. I know your mother told you about what I and Zingisa did. I just want to say I'm sorry,"

Liyema: "Were you going to apologize had you not laid on your deathbed, Ta?" I felt a lump on my throat but I was not going to cry. He didn't answer. "I'll answer for you since you can't speak all of a sudden. You were not going to apologize had you still been the great Elephant in his fancy office and big house. After your affair with Zingisa came out you didn't say sorry, you instead called me

weak and said I should get over it because it happened. But now that you don't feel powerful anymore you are able to know what being humble is. So sorry if I don't believe that you're sorry. For all I know you are pretending to be sick and weak just so we could bring you home and have you manipulate the law by acting terminally ill," I shouted but Lakhiwe looked at me. It's that "calm down before you have another heart attack" look. I took a deep breath and calmed myself down.

Ta: "And you have all the right to be angry and not trust me. Son, I just don't want to die while there is bad blood between us because it might be hard on you to deal with that. I'm not saying forgive me now, but just know I'm sorry," he said between sniffs. Is he crying?

Liyema: "Did you ever love us, Ta? I mean I don't recall you telling us that you do and your actions proved that you don't," I wiped my tears off quickly before my family could see.

Ta: "What father doesn't love his kids? Of course I love you. I just never said it because my father

never said it to me. He was strict and men were not suppose to show weakness in his view. He didn't show affection and vulnerability so I grew up thinking it's how a man should behave,"

Liyema: "I grew up with you as a father, yet I'm not like you so stop giving me excuses. Also tell me what exactly you're sorry for?"

Ta: "For pressuring and manipulating you into marrying Zingisa. For sleeping with your wife three months after you said your vows, for helping her fool you into believing that you are sick, for making your mother sick. I'm

sorry for everything," he said while crying. I left the room because the kids were making too much noise.

Liyema: "Do you know what it's like to wake up next to a woman you knowing you're not meant for just because you want to please your father, Ta?"

Ta: "No, son,"

Liyema: "Do you know what it took me to come to terms with my status? I nearly turned into an alcoholic because of it," I shouted.

Ta: "I wish I could turn the clock around,"

Liyema: "Do you realize that I have panicked a few times because I thought I forgot to take my treatment on the set time only for my wife to remind me I'm not on treatment anymore? I nearly made Lakhawe a widow because you lack morals, principles and values. Mma went to the doctor just yesterday because the treatment gives her migraines. I don't even know why you bothered us because we were busy patching the open wounds. We have been happy and healing

without you. Stay where you are because you are a damn virus yourself, man. Everything you touch rots and I don't want you near my children. Not once have you called your daughter to get to know her because you are upset because she didn't get aborted. That's sick and it's a sickness this family does not need. I will look after the family, me and Lungi have been doing well. I don't wish death upon you but I so wish you'd leave us to heal from the wounds you have caused us," I shouted.

Ta: "Bring me home so I'd die at home please. I don't deserve you all but don't let my spirit wonder because that is what will happen if I die here. I can't do anything for myself,"

Liyema: "Call your brothers or let Dudumashe get you to your home. We can't help because you are a fugitive just speaking to you right now is a crime. I'm not willing to risk my family visiting me in jail. Goodbye,"

I ended the call before he could say more. I hate that he has the ability of turning hearts to stone. I don't want my heart to be cold.

I first stood by myself to calm down before helping my wife get our children ready. I will forgive him someday just not ready yet. I wish he'd get well but I don't want him in our lives. We packed the blanket and heavy picnic basket in the car before strapping the kids in their seats. Lala drove to a wine farm. We both don't drink but it's more the kid friendly setting we are after. We arrived and everything was just beautiful. There were a few families already so we got a spot under a nice shady tree. We got out the food and drinks. Lala

made sure everything is healthy. We also took a few pictures. I took the boys for a walk after we had lunch and they loved it here. They were able to walk barefoot on the grass and run free. Lala was reading her romance novel in peace, everything was just perfect until I got attacked by a duck but my boys helped me chase it away and it went to get his back up too. Needless to say we ran to Lakiwe with tails between our legs but we did so while laughing.

Liyema: "Hide behind, Mama," I said while running behind them.

The ducks stopped pursuing us long ago but it was fun to watch them run. They all got on their mother and I did too but not with my entire weight. She fell backwards and laughed.

Banele: "Duck-Duck," he pointed behind him.

Bukhosi: "Kwaak, Kwaak, Kwaak," he said in attempt to imitate the ducks. They all stood and said it while flapping their arms. We laughed so much.

Lakhiwe: "This is fun. Thank you for suggesting it, baby," she kissed me.

Liyema: "We deserve some time alone away from the extended family. We need to plan for December. What are we going to do?" I looked at her.

Lakhiwe: "I thought we're going to your gran's,"

Liyema: "Yes, but I'm not having you slave around being a Makoti the entire holiday. I was thinking we spend a week there, a week at your grandparents and then the last week go check out the garden route," I held her.

Lakhiwe: "I'd love that very much. I think it would make

Makhulu happy. We can invite my father over too. He is already talking about loneliness," she shook her head and I laughed.

Liyema: "A man is not meant to be alone especially one of his generation who still believes certain roles in the house are for women,"

Lakhiwe: "I'm glad you don't think like that. Imagine eating at 11pm but you came home at 6pm just because you waited for me to come cook," we both laughed.

"Aren't you overdoing it with running around with the fantastic four?" she looked at me

Liyema: "No, they don't even run fast yet. Do you know I'm saving for their journey to the mountain already?" she looked at me.

Lakhiwe: "Which is what, eighteen years from now?" she laughed.

Liyema: "Umgidi is an expensive affairs and having four boys go at the same time will be a financial burden on us if we don't plan for it ahead of time," I kissed her neck, my favourite spot, or at least one of them.

Lakhiwe: "You know better when it comes to that, baby. So do as you think is best, I trust you,"

she kissed my lips. We kept a close eye on the boys who were playing. I see the best of friends when I look at them.

Soso: "Ntombi?" said some slender guy while looking at Lala. She looked at him and smiled.

Lakhiwe: ""Hi, Soso. It's been a while," she smiled and stood. He had his arms around my wife before she even got up properly.

Do some men not have any respect for other men's wives? I stood to stand behind Lala and he back up.

Lakhiwe: "Baby, this is Sonwabile and Soso this is my husband Liyema Elephant," she introduced us. I was about to ask if he makes a habit of hugging people's wives like that but decided against it.

Liyema: "Good to meet you," I shook his hand.

Soso: "Likewise, Mr Elephant. So you finally got a man strong enough to wait on you huh?" he laughed and Lala just smiled. "So good seeing you again. Are you this side permanently now?"

Lakhiwe: "Yeah, I'm at UCT now. I relocated when I got married,"

Soso: "Where are the kids you once told me about?" she pointed to the boys

Lakhiwe: "Right there messing up people's grass which I'm sure is not allowed. Let me go stop them before we get a bill. It was nice seeing you, Soso," she smiled.

Soso: "Let's meet up. I've got to run. Here is my business card, please call me. I tried your old number but it belongs to someone else so I figured you changed it. See you around," he hugged her

again. "Look after her, man. You're lucky to have her," he added before rushing off. Lakiwe went to stop the boys from ruining the people's grass. I then remembered that the guy was the one I saw her at Zim's wedding with. The one who was holding all her assets while dancing. The six of us played until the little ones fell asleep. I sat behind her while she sat between my legs eating strawberries.

Liyema: "Will you meet up with him?" I asked. She turned her head to look at me.

Lakiwe: "Nope," she smiled.

Liyema: "Good because he still has the boys for you," she raised her brow while looking at me.

Lakhiwe: "So you don't trust me?"

Liyema: "I trust you completely but him I don't, baby," she turned around to face me and kissed me.

It was a passionate one but luckily other people had left.

"Let's go home," I slid my hand under her dress and she moaned.

Lakhiwe: "Liyema the doctor said...,"

Liyema: "We'll be slow and gentle. Please, baby," I pleaded.

She agreed and I carried the boys one by one to the car. They are getting heavier. We drove back home and I couldn't wait to tear her clothes off. When we got home we put the boys in their beds and I went to the lounge where Lala is. She took off her dress. She's not wearing a bra. I walked to her and kissed her while grabbing her ass. She took my shirt off and just when my pants were about to go too we heard a scream from upstairs. Both of us got a fright and I walked up to see what the problem is only to be greeted by smiles. Couldn't

they give us at least fifteen minutes? We had no choice but to postpone our love session. Having kids can cramp our style sometimes. We knew they were only going to sleep at night now. We all watched TV and played once again. Lala and I spoke about my father's call more. I cooked dinner while she bathed the boys. We fed them and put them to bed. We were tired but managed to eat. We then went to take a shower together and somehow washed the exhaustion away. She let me sit on the bed while she applied moisturizer on my skin. It was so

innocent yet so sensual. She got on top of me and applied some on my chest. She would glide her breasts across my chest and kiss me. How can she not expect me to get too excited when she's doing this. She kissed me passionately and I didn't want her to stop. She kissed my neck, it was long, wet kisses. She kissed lower and lower until she got to my manhood. My body tense when she reached and touched it. I stopped her, I had to.

Liyema: "I'm not ready yet, Lala," I looked at her and the

disappointments in her eyes was hard to miss.

Lakhiwe: "Liyem..."

Liyema: "Allow me time to prepare mentally for it please. Next time I won't stop you," I kissed her.

I know she's not happy. I placed her on the bottom and kissed her. The moment got heated and she told me to skip the foreplay for the next round because she couldn't wait to be one with me. I searched for the condoms in the side drawer while kissing her. I

couldn't find any so I broke the kiss to look. The drawer is empty.

Liyema: "Didn't we have a few left?" I looked at her.

Lakhiwe: "I kinda threw them away," she said softly.

Liyema: "Without talking to me, Lakhiwe?"

Lakhiwe: "We don't need them anymore," she said. I got up from on top of her and sat at the edge of the bed.

Liyema: "I'm not ready to stop using condoms, Lakhiwe. Would putting a condom on now make our sex life less pleasurable just

because you know we can do it without it?" I raised my voice.

Lakhiwe: "That didn't even cross my mind," she tried to touch me but I stood. "Liyema, I'm sorry for throwing your condoms away. I thought you won't be needing them,"

Liyema: "Well you thought wrong, Ntombi," I looked at her. I've never called her that since she's gotten her new name. She just looked down. I went to the bathroom and locked it. There was silence for a long while until I heard her apologize.

Lakhiwe: "Liyema, I'll buy some on tomorrow. I'm sorry for getting you out of the mood. We can sleep and do nothing if you won't do it without protection. I won't lie I'm disappointed because I've been thinking about this night for a while but you're not ready and I understand,"

She didn't plead with me to open the door. I felt like crap for this. I thought maybe she went to another room because it was dead silent. I went out after a while and found her holding a condom in her shaking hand while crying.

Lakhiwe: "Found it in my bag. It's the only one left. I miss you, Liyema," she looked at me. She walked closer and placed it in my hand. How could I make love to her after the way I behaved? I hugged her and she apologized more for rushing me. I apologized to her for being a jerk.

Liyema: "I don't trust his word anymore, baby. He might say he made everything up," I said while I still held her in my arms.

Lakhiwe: "The doctor confessed to forging you're results. Baby, they tested you about five times and the results came back negative. I

can't imagine what you must be going through though so I will be patient. Sex was great with a condom. I guess I'm just curious," Liyema: "I'm curious too," I kissed her.

Lakhiwe: "We'll explore some other time. Let's just chill and watch a horror movie," I laughed.

Liyema: "And have you wake me up because you are too afraid of going to the bathroom alone? No thanks," she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I'm no longer that girl," We went back to bed and I got up to get her laptop since mine only

had work stuff on it. She went to get snacks and we chilled in bed again. The horror was barely 15 minutes in and someone already clung to me and covered her eyes shouting at the victim. Her phone rang. She didn't want to answer since it's an unknown number but I told her it might be Hlubi. My sister changes network a lot. She answered it. I heard the name Soso and just wanted to take the phone and end the call. She asked him where he got her number and told him not to call at night because she doesn't usually take calls at night. I could hear him

laugh. He said he'd call tomorrow and Lala said her good-bye.

Apparently he got her number from Zimkhitha. I don't want her near him, I don't like the man. We "watched" our movie and I must say her fear is rather funny. Why watch such if you'll miss the goods parts? I loved being the one next to her though. We fell asleep after watching the movie and as I predicted I got woken up to stand by the door while she was inside because she swore that something was in the room. She walked out and I started screaming and she screamed to

and went to the bed and covered her head with the covers. I couldn't resist. I laughed so much and she realized I screamed at nothing. She got up and hit me with a pillow.

Lakhiwe: "You are cruel, Liyema. My heart nearly stopped," she still hit me but I held her arms and kissed her.

Liyema: "I'm sorry, baby. I was being silly. Let's not watch that again please," I kissed her.

I put her on the bed and took her gown off. We both are hungry for each other badly but I've got a

problem. She gave me the condom but I put it aside. My heart was beating so fast. She got up and sat me down and got on her knees in front of me. The anticipation of what is about to happen sent shock waves all over my body but then I remembered that she had never went down on a man and I got scared too.

Liyema: "Lala, no teeth please," I pleaded and she laughed. She was so unsure of what should do so I had to school her. It was touch and go at first and I felt some teeth in some moments which freaked me out but she got the

hang of things and I couldn't help but lay on my back enjoying the moment. It was not the greatest oral experience I've had but for a first timer she managed to get my toes curled. I couldn't take it any longer though, I wanted to know how it would be to be inside her. I stopped her and she was not happy at all. I kissed her passionately before I slid inside her warm folds.

Liyema: "Shit, Sh..." I said. "Baby, I don't think I'll last long," I said because I didn't want her to expect a long session when I know I'll be a two minute man in this

round. Our thrusts were quick and I couldn't hold on. I tried thinking about non sexual stuff to delay but I failed. The pleasure was too intense. I laid on top of her knowing that I didn't pleasure her one bit, which never happened before.

Liyema: "I'm sorry. You just...damn Lala it's just so warm and oh my goodness," she smiled.

Lakhiwe: "I understand, baby but only this once,"

Liyema: "No, it'll take time to get used to. You feel amazing," I kissed her. "Not that you didn't

before but now it's...shit...it's just...I wish it didn't have to end,"

Lakhiwe: "Baby, you're talking to much," we both laughed.

We cuddled for a while and I went to get a towel for her. I felt like a failure for not being able to last long. I'm sure she will want us to use protection again. I found her talking on the phone and thought it's So again but realized it's my phone. She gave it to me before disappearing into the bathroom. It's Dudumashe and he's calling to say that Ta has passed on. I thanked him for letting me know.

Lala came to the room and found me crying. I don't know why it crying because he wasn't much of a father. She held me and I told her what happened. The strange thing is that guilt he spoke of that will come with not forgiving him before he died. I'm feeling it. I'm thinking about how I cut the call short when he was apologizing. Now I have to take the need to the family. I know Hlubi says she didn't like him but I know she wanted to meet him. Makhulu on the other hand will get sicker. He might not have been the best father but I am

the success that I am today all thanks to his hard work. I might not have liked him but I never stopped loving him. He died having never told any of his living children that he loves them. I hope he will be with Lulongke wherever he is going, I know it would make his soul rest in peace. He wronged me but at least he apologized. I will find out where he is and bring him home. He deserves to lay next to the Elephant greats. Rest in peace Mlambo, Lubisi, Hlubi, Senene, noXhaka.

SIXTY-THREE

FASTFORWARD - THREE AND A
HALF YEARS LATER 😊

Lakhiwe

Three years ago I obtained my Bachelor of Commerce in Financial Management and Hlubi encouraged me to come continue with my studies so I went on to do Bachelor of Commerce with Honors in Financial Management Science which I obtained two years ago. This year I've been doing my Bachelor of Commerce with Masters in Financial Management and I'm proud to say I'll be graduating today. Five

long years of blood sweat and tears at university. Years of being lied to by Bonga when he said he's doing all in his power to get me to school but was not even trying. I don't even recognize my own life today. When I was doing my third year three years ago Hlubi was doing her matric which she failed but she tried again when I was doing my Honours and passed obtaining three distinctions. We are all so proud of her. While I was doing my Masters she started her first year towards a law degree. Liyema has also gone to study his

degree in Marketing

Communications at the school of advertising. I must say both of us studying has not been easy.

There were moments when we would lose touch with each other a bit which forced us to sit down and have a schedule where we put days aside for ourselves and the children. The boys are now five and they are now able to have conversations with us. They might be quads but their personalities are most certainly not the same which is very interesting. Liyema did his best to bring his father's body home with

the help of Dudumashe and Tata was buried next to his father in Mtata. His brothers are still accusing Mma for his death but my mother in law is not bothered. Lungi got a job as a graphic designer after he finally decided to finish school and we are all proud of him too. The other new addition to our family is our daughter Amahle Xaba. Liyema and I were driving through Khayelitsha to go pick up Makhulu from her cousin's when she was visiting us. We heard a new born's cries when we drove by a dumping sight. Liyema was brave enough

to go inspect and that's when he found her and she smiled when he first saw her and immediately stopped crying. We went through formal procedure of staying on the scene while waiting for the cops. They put her in a baby safe house for a few months before they asked us to foster her. I was a bit reluctant, not because I didn't want her to give her a home but because I had just begun my Master's and barely had time for my four toddlers let alone a baby but when Liyema said Pat could be nanny full time I agreed. We love her to bits. She's not

legally ours but she's been staying with us for almost a year now. She's one year and three months old. At first the boys didn't like the new addition one but but they have warmed up to her. We are hoping to legally adopt her since her mother and father and extended family has not been found. Hlubi is more attached to her because she was once an abandoned baby in a way but she knows Mahle is safe with us. We won't harm her in any way.

I sat in the barber's chair getting a fresh haircut for my graduation ceremony later. I

think now that I've finished studying I might grow my afro big again. My hair being short just made life easier because I never had enough time to get ready in the mornings. Liyema and I went to get my academic dress and tickets. I don't know how my husband did it but he managed to get three extra tickets. Liyema and Makhulu were the only ones whom we planned were going to attend but now my father, grandfather and best friend Hlubi can come with. I called her and she screamed with excitement. We also went to get my custom made

wide legged jumpsuit suit. I love jumpsuits. It looks so elegant yet edgy at the same time. We drove back home so I could get myself ready. I looked at Liyema, we've been married for over four years now. His heart has been behaving and he finally accepted that he is not HIV positive. He looks so serious while driving.

Lakhiwe: "Baby, thank you for supporting my dreams as you've promised to do. I know it's not easy to have a wife who was also a student but you have been encouraging me for the past five years, well four years because you

weren't really I'm my life in my first year," we both laughed.

Liyema: "I'm just proud of you. I can't believe I'm attending your third graduation today, beautiful. Look at you, Mrs Cum Laude," he said in such a charming voice and I was left blushing while I did a mini happy dance.

Lakhiwe: "Five years and five kids later we are here, baby," he smiled.

Liyema: "Life has been good. Not easy but God had carried us through. Are you still up for making Mahle a part of the

family officially?" I nodded. "I think she's happy with us. Should we get a bigger house?"

Lakhiwe: "Easy, big guy. She's good in the room that was the guest room. Let's not commit too much only for her parent's family to come for her. We are still waiting on the social worker," he nodded.

Liyema: "Thank you for the wonderful years of marriage. I think you and I were really thrown in the deep end from the beginning. Having four kids when we weren't even together. Marriage not long after we

started dating. I'm glad we get to be here at this moment about to celebrate yet another of your achievements. Will you further your studies?"

Lakhiwe: "No, not yet. I just want to start working and once I've gained enough experience maybe start my own business," he smiled.

Liyema: "So we are really building these empires, hey partner,"

Lakhiwe: "You bet we are, my love. Even our grandchildren should benefit from what we have build.

I foresee generational wealth," we did a high five.

We arrived home and the entire family was there. Those who will be left behind will be preparing a family dinner. I found Makhulu, Tamkhulu and Tata in their Sunday best already. I quickly went upstairs with Hlubi to get ready. I took a quick shower and sat down so she'd do my make up. My sister in law and I share almost everything. I got dressed and I felt so sexy and beautiful. I went downstairs and the family all cheered. I love these people so much. My husband couldn't help

but kiss me and made me turn around.

Bukhosi: "Wow, Mama you look breathtaking," the elders laughed.

Lungi: "Breathtaking? Where did you learn such a big word?" he looked at his nephew.

Bukhosi: "Tata says Mama looks breathtaking too. Not so, Tata?" he looked at his father.

Liyema: "Yes, my boy," he smiled.

Banele: "I like the dress that you were wearing Sunday. Not this dress pants," he said with a frown on his face. Trust mr I say

it like it is to say something like that.

Lakhiwe: "I will wear it again but today this is what I'm going with," I looked at him and he just shook his head.

Bandile: "Mama, you look as pretty as my girlfriend but you are prettier," he smiled and everyone laughed. I have a daughter in law already?

Bubele: "Mama, I want to come with," he sulked.

Liyema: "You guys have to stay because children are not allowed where we're going," he lied.

Lakhiwe: "Thank you for the compliments, my babies but Tata is right, no kids allowed. For now let us take pictures together and Makhulu will give you some cake too later if you behave once we've gone," they all looked at Mrs E and she nodded.

Makhulu: "Before we go I just want to say something. Oh, Ntombi I can't believe this is you. I'm just so proud words fail me but I can't keep quiet because I'm so proud of you," she started to cry and I almost did to but Hlubi pointed at me to stop me. "This is the third university

celebration I'll go to with you and I just...oh but you have worked hard to be at this point. Tata and I are blessed to be here with you. We love you so much," she wiped her tears.

Tamkhulu: "Nto-Nto years of crying for your mother but she wiped our tears by leaving you for us to heal our wounds. You are the first in the family to have obtained such. I tell everyone in the village who gossiped about you when you were low that the person you spat on is now too high for you all to reach. When you had the boys they said you'd amount

to nothing especially after you gave them away but look what God did. Thank you for not leaving us behind when things started to look up in your life. Many children forsake their elders but not you. We love you with a love no words can describe," he took out a cloth from his pocket and wiped his tears.

Tata: "Oh Ntombi, with an upbringing like yours many would have thought you'd end up in the gutter. My ex wife played her part in making sure suffering is what you know but look where those who made you suffer are.

In a dark cell rotting while you blossom. When you were born your mother said you'd be a doctor and I know she'd have been dancing here right now in honour of her only child. You and your husband have helped me and Lwazi when I sent him to the mountain. You advise him and you try to reach out to your sister even if she rejects you. We love you so much," Liyema: "I'd hate to be the party pooper but this one has to be seated a few minutes before the ceremony starts. Speeches will be done later on," he smiled.

Hlubi: "Let's go. We don't want to be locked out I'm too excited to risk not being let in," she ran out and we laughed.

I had to give Bubele extra comforts for leaving them behind. I think he is the Mama's boy. We took a few pictures and made our way to the venue. I went through all procedures and was finally seated. The ceremony started after a while and just knowing my husband and parents are in the audience made me so happy. When my name got called I got goosebumps. I've done this two times before but the feeling

of nerves and excitement never leaves. Makhulu came to the front and recited my clan names. Her voice was soft but my ears were focused on her. I cried. After a while everything was done and we stood out taking a lot of pictures. When it was time to go home we instead drove elsewhere. I knew they were up to something. We drove to the place where they organised a party for me. Sindi, Xoli and Dudu were there. I ran to Dudu because it has been a while since I've seen her. They are all working now. I cried so much

because I was overwhelmed by the love and support. I'm officially a Master's in Financial Management Science graduate. They hired Soul Kulture as part of the entertainment. Their song "Ngeliny"ilanga" hit deep. I remember a time when I said one day I'd be happy. One day I'll have a degree. One day I'll have a husband who loves me. One day I'll have kids of my own. One day I'll reunite with my family. Then I met Bonga who made me believe that my day would never come. Today I'm happy, I've graduated Cum Laude holding a

Master's degree, I have an amazing husband, I have five beautiful children, I'm surrounded by family. Indeed the devil may try his luck but in never giving up I got to witness God's grace in my life. So this song spoke to me in ways many won't understand. Amahle looked at me like I'm crazy while helping me wipe my tears. Liyema and I would love nothing but to give a child a happy home so she may never go through things Hlubi and I went through. Liyema kissed me after the performance and made his way to the front.

Liyema: "Wow, Uhm I actually don't have much to say. I just wanted to thank my in laws for blessings me with their beautiful child. Lala, our loved ones know what you and I have been through. I think there were moments when we were both too tired to go on yet here we are. It's said that a woman with both beauty and brains is a lethal combination and I'm blessed to have a wife who thinks and loves as you do. I've watched you excel in each role you have been assigned in this life. You've been an amazing wife, great mother to

our children, wonderful daughter to our parents, and a smart student. I'm honoured to be celebrating you, my love. Three graduations and something tells me you're not finished, just resting," we laughed. "You're amazing. To you, baby," he raised his glass. "I love you," everyone raised their glasses and cheered. He walked to me and kissed me. We forgot where we were for a moment.

Lakhiwe: "I love you too," I hugged him.

This day couldn't get any more perfect. Soon I'll be starting my

new job as an accountant at the company who supported me financially throughout the five years. Their CEO even came out to the party to give a speech because I'm one of their best students. I felt so special. I can't wait to help my husband with expenses. I can't wait to surprise him with weekends away that I paid for. I know I won't earn much at first but I'm a hard worker. I'll make my mark at that company. The party went on and sis Pat took Mahle home. We were all dancing and just being happy. I danced with my boys too.

I can't believe they have grown so much. Soon they will be going to university and go on to live their own lives. They no longer the cuddly bunnies they used to be. They have become so independent. I went to the front and said a thank you speech. Hubby is right, I might just return to school but that won't be now. For now I'll support him until he graduates. I love him and I love the life we have built without any pressure. We might buy that bigger house but I'm not ready to let go of the one we've made so many memories in.

Hlubi

When I failed matric the first time I wanted to give up but my cheerleaders, my family said hell no. I admit that my father's funeral was sad. I didn't want to meet the man only when he laid in a coffin but life happened. Zola and I are better and I even say Mma now on occasions. I've settled in completely over the years. I go to the December family reunions with them and I love it. My relationship with my brothers is awesome. They tend to be overprotective though I'm older but I like it. Khi-Khi and I

are inseparable. I even help her do her duties when she's at Makhulu's. I'm a self proclaimed feminist so I've let them all know that it's absurd that Makoti have to slave of for a house full of people yet we claim them to be daughters of the family. Needless to say our makotis don't wake up early and are on their feet all day anymore. My first year at university is great and I've made a few friends. My sisters are doing great too. Two are also in university and other's are working in retail. Mrs B is still my therapist. I can't thank her

enough. I also hope that Amahle will end up with my brother and sister because I've read the horrors babies go through in most foster homes. Here she is safe and loved. I don't understand who abandons a baby at a dumping sight. She could have been eaten by dogs or raped. I think Liyema and Lakhiwe were meant to find her. Clearly her mother didn't want her so I don't understand why the social workers won't let them make her theirs officially. My nephews are my buddies. I'm the cool aunt and I love that I

can sneak them ice cream when their parents forbid it.

Being at yet another one of Lakhawe's graduations had inspired me. I will graduate too someday even if it takes me years. I want to know what it feels like to walk on that stage while my family cheers. It's sad that Mlungisi never got to know that we had something in common, the love for law. I've still kept Zola's secret about her hand in framing him. She also told me about her past. One I can't fault her for. We are in university because people like her fought for

a better future for the coming generations. I was busy dancing and getting down with Lakhiwe when someone tapped my shoulder. I looked back and it's a man. He looked handsome I must admit.

Lakhiwe: "Mr Mbuzo, thank you so much for coming," she hugged him.

Mbuzo: "Thank you for the invite and I did tell you it's Yanda, not Mr Mbuzo," he smiled.

Lakhiwe: "I'll remember that. Are you looking for Liyema? He took our boys home,"

Mbuzo: "I was actually hoping that you'd introduce me to the beautiful lady in your company," he smiled at me.

Hlubi: "And you couldn't just come to me directly and ask for my name. You had to turn around sharp corners when you could just come straight to me," I said sarcastically.

Lakhiwe: "Hlubi," she said between closed teeth.

Mbuzo: "Oh I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect nor offence," he looked down.

Hlubi: "I'm Mahlubandile Elephant by the way. You don't have to sneak around like an FBI agent trying to get information on me," I looked at him.

Lakhiwe: "Hlubi," she said again softly and held my arm. "She's Liyema sister, Yanda. Hlubi this is Yanda Mbuzo, one of Liyema's clients," she smiled.

Mbuzo: "A pleasure, Miss Elephant," he smiled. I looked at Lakhiwe who was giving signal with her eyes that I should say something back.

Hlubi: "Likewise, Yanda and don't call me Miss Elephant is suffocating," I finally said.

Lakhiwe put her hand over her face. What did I say wrong? He's lucky I'm even talking to him and I'm only doing it because he bring my brother cash.

Lakhiwe: "My grandmother looks tired. I will go check," she said.

Hlubi: "My favourite Makhulu. Let me go rub her feet," I said.

Lakhiwe: "No, stay here and dance. You know Makhulu hated it when we fuss," she gave a naughty smile before running off.

I looked at the tall man in front of me and waited for him to leave me alone. I don't want a man.

I'm no longer afraid of them but I don't want to date.

Mbuzo: "So how long will you be in town for?"

Hlubi: "Forever and I'm not going to meet up with you after this so erase that imaginary date you already pictured in your mind," I looked at him. He laughed softly.

Mbuzo: "Wow," he said softly.

"Okay I've erased it," he laughed and I actually did to but not for him to notice. "So what do you do,

Mahlubandile? I love your name by the way. Never heard it before,"

Hlubi: "I'm a first year law student. I love it too that's why I gave myself the name," his eyes widened. Clearly surprised.

Mbuzo: "Interesting I'd like to hear how you managed to name yourself when most of us had no say in ours. So what were you doing before you went back to school to study law?" he asked.

Hlubi: "Something that will make you wish you never walked my way,"

Mbuzo: "I'm listening," he looked at me so attentively. The tenderness in his eyes made me unsettled in a way.

Hlubi: "I was a escort, a prostitute. There now you know so you can go on and find another lady interesting," I blurted out. I want to scare him off. So far it's worked with the men who have hit on me.

Mbuzo: "I still find you the most interesting in the room. If you were hoping for me to go run out that door because of your past then I'm sorry to let you know

that now I really want to know you more than before,"

Hlubi: "Didn't you hear what I said?" I asked sarcastically.

Mbuzo: "Loud and clear. I also know we are here now in the present. Do I want to hear about your past? Yes. Will I judge you for things you did when you weren't even in my life? No," he sounded sincere.

Hlubi: "Okay, nice to meet you and your pretentious self, Yanda. Have a great night," I wanted to walk off but he held my arm. I no longer put up a scene when a man

does that unless I have to. I had no reason to this time.

Mbuzo: "Here is my number. Should you change your mind, call me,"

Hlubi: "What do you want from me?"

Mbuzo: "For now a dance and later when you're up to it maybe a date," I looked at him for a long while.

Hlubi: "Out of all these woman, young beautiful professional women you chose me? Even after I've told you I've sold my body in the past?"

Mbuzo: "Yes and what's so difficult to understand about that?" he looked at me. This guy though I don't want to get soft.

Hlubi: "I don't know. Maybe the fact that all men ran when I told them. Maybe because men want younger girls. Maybe because men don't want an old student as a girlfriend,"

Mbuzo: "Then don't judge me by the choices of those men. They know what they are looking for and I'm glad it wasn't you. I see a beautiful woman who is ambitious and carefree and doesn't take crap from anyone,"

Hlubi: "Why aren't you married? I mean you're at that age were you should have been married for years?," he laughed.

Mbuzo: "I'm not that old, I'm only 40. I've never been married but I do have a ten year old daughter who lives with me full time because her mother is married and the man doesn't want my child in his family. It's okay because I don't want her raised by another man anyway. Do you have children," I shook my head "So wanna do coffee? Your brother knows me very well so even if I wanted to try funny

things I know he'd find and kill me,"

Hlubi: "I'll think about it. What do you do?"

Mbuzo: "I'm a business man. I make tailor made man's wear, suits mostly. So by proffesion I'm a designer,":

Hlubi: "Okay Yanda the designer I'll think about calling you," he smiled and nodded.

I walked away from him as fast as possible. Laksiwe was wait with a smile and like typical girls we walked out while holding hands to talk about what just

happened. I told her about what happened and she did not look shocked.

Lakhiwe: "He's a good man. So will you call him?"

Hlubi: "Won't Liyema have a problem with it since he's a client?" she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "You're no child. So you're worried about what Liyema will think does that mean you'll call?" she asked excitedly.

Hlubi: "I haven't been with a man since my last client years ago. I don't know what making love is, Lakhiwe. Yes, my body betrayed

me with some of my clients by making me enjoy some of the sexual acts but I've never known what having sex for love is like,"

Lakhiwe: "Why on earth is your mind jumping straight to sex?"

Hlubi: "Because it's what men have wanted from me since I was a teen. I just think they all do even now,"

Lakhiwe: "Well he asked for coffee at a public place where you'll feel less threatened. If you want I'll even lurk around close by should you need to be rescued," I smiled.

Hlubi: "You would?" she smiled and nodded.

Lakhiwe: "Look, friend I can't force you to go out with him just because I think he's a decent man if you don't want to. What I'm trying to tell you is that not all men want to destroy you. I told you once that I had the same fears when Liyema wanted us to be more than friends. A part of me was sure he's going to be abusive in the long run but look at us now. You just need to be brave enough to let someone in,"

Hlubi: "He's achieved so much already,"

Lakhiwe: "I'll sound like a broken record but that was me and Liyema once upon a time. A first year student with a man with his own business. Feeling guilty for having to ask him for money when I'm short but look at us. We made it and soon I'll help him too. Maybe you were right, in a way our lives are similar" we both laughed.

Hlubi: "Been telling you for years. So should I go for it?"

Lakhiwe: "What does your intuition tell you, that gut feeling?"

Hlubi: "I'm intrigued by him. By what he sees in me though I told him I'm damaged good,"

Lakhiwe: "I was another man's trash but now I'm my husband's treasure. Different characters, remember that. I'm sure his past is not squicky clean either. I say try. I'll go sit in the corner of the coffee shop taizer, pepper spray and fake gun in hand. When there is trouble I will electrocute him and spray his eyes until they fall out," we laughed so much.

Hlubi: "Stop it, crazy ass," we hugged. "Okay I'll call him during

the week. What about the daughter though!"

Lakhiwe: "She's a part of his package. Lovely little princess so don't worry. He won't introduce you to his child yet anyway. He needs to know you first before allowing you in her life. Earlier on when you were being sarcastic I admit I was a bit like "what the hell" but I remembered you breath sarcasm so he needs to know what he brings himself into. Proud that you were yourself. High five" she raised her hand and I hit it with mine. "So he knows you're a sarcastic bum and

your past but still wants to go for coffee. Should I start preparing for your wedding?" we both laughed.

Hlubi: "No, crazy ass," we laughed. "Oh but we do have to prepare yours and Liyema's though. I'm thinking December,"

Lakhiwe: "Thinking of having it after he graduates,"

Hlubi: "First it was after I get my degree, then after finishing my Honours, then after finishing my Masters and now after Liyema finish his studies in two years. No, no guys, you've been

promising us a wedding. Even if it's something traditional yho," I sulked and she laughed. "Who keeps delaying?" she looked down and I knew it's her. "I should have known, Mrs I want to contribute to the wedding expenses too," I said and she laughed.

Liyema: "What are you guys doing out here?" he appeared.

Hlubi: "Telling your wife we need a wedding celebration. I've never been to a wedding guys please," I sulked like a teen. Liyema walked to Lakhiwe and pointed a finger at her.

Lakhiwe: "But you agreed, Ndlovu," she laughed.

Liyema: "To wait on you to finish not for me to complete my studies. We'll grow old and still not have had a wedding," we laughed.

Hlubi: "Let's do it early next year while it's still hot,"

Lakhiwe: "That's between my hubby and I, dear self appointed wedding planner," we laughed.

Liyema: "So I just had an interesting conversation with Yanda. He asked for my permission to take you on a date," he looked at me.

Hlubi: "I told this man to stop asking other people what concerns me. I will go and give....,"

Lakhiwe: "He already asked you out, dude and you said no so calm yourself down," she cut me short. I was almost upset until I realized she's giving me a taste of my own sarcasm.

Hlubi: "Oh,"

Lakhiwe: "All he's doing is to prepare Liyema should you agree so it won't affect their working relationship,"

Hlubi: "Do men still ask for permission to date a woman from

the family leader?" I asked while blushing.

Liyema: "I don't remember doing that," they laughed

Lakhiwe: "Baby, you didn't even ask them for permission to marry me," she laughed.

Liyema: "Damn this modern living. I'm sorry, baby," they kissed.

I smiled and just shook my head. I left them while they were still kissing. It was as if I've just disappeared. I stood and looked back once more and realized that I want that. I want to joke with my significant other about times

they messed up too. I walked back inside before the love birds show me other stuff. I walked in and some of the guests had gone already. Yanda stood talking to some group but his eyes were on me when they met mine. I admit I blushed. He looked at me but not in a "hey, tramp I want to screw you" way that most men have. But in a "Hi, I'd like to get to know you better," way. Or I might be over thinking things. I went to stand with Lakhiwe's friends from Port Elizabeth and they are great people. I went to

where Yanda stood and asked to talk to him. He excused himself.

Hlubi: "I'm up for that coffee now if you are game," he put his glass of whiskey aside and nodded quickly. I couldn't help but laugh. We went next door where the restaurant had a little cosy coffee spot. He pulled a chair out for me. This is like Liyema but with an extra dose of gentlemen. He sat down and ordered two coffees.

Mbuzo: "You look beautiful by the way," I looked down and blushed. What is he doing to me?.

Hlubi: "Usually I'd say "I know" but thank you," he smiled.

Yanda: "I thought I had what I'd say to you once we're alone figured out but now I'm not even sure," we laughed. Lakhawe stood by the door and held her pepper spray up. I burst out of laughter and he had to wait until I'm done laughing yet he is laughing too but no idea why.

Hlubi: "I'm sorry, Uhm my sister just kinda gave me a sign that she's watching you closely so should you try anything funny she'll apparently spray your eyes until they eyes fall out," he

laughed too. I wiped my tears.
Both Lakhiwe and I are crazy
and I love how we are together.
Yanda: "You've got a funny laugh.
I was laughing at your laugh," we
laughed.

Hlubi: "Well thanks, Yanda for
saying I'm a clown. See you don't
need to rehearse what you would
have said to me. Conversations
should come naturally and
unfiltered,"

Yanda: "Hmm maybe if I hang
around you long enough your
carefree spirit will rub off on me,"

Hlubi: "Yes and just live. Life is too short. So did you study fashion design?"

Mbuzo: "Yes and it made many ladies think I'm gay hence I didn't have a girlfriend all through university," I laughed.

Hlubi: "I actually also thought all men in fashion are gay," he raised his brow and looked at me and I laughed. "I know better now," he laughed softly. He's handsome. He has a honey like skin color and a red birthmark on his cheek. Well if it's a birthmark.

Yanda: "I just love creating. I'm in partnership with with three event planning companies so I make sure their clients look dapper on those special occasions,"

Hlubi: "You're looking dapper too," I blurted out. I was thinking out loud. Oh gosh☐?

Yanda: "Thank you. Well I have to wear what I make confidently so people will buy. Having your brother helping with marketing has helped a lot,"

Hlubi: "He's great at what he does," I said and there was silence. "I'm sure you're wondering

about my past right?" I said. He shook his head.

Yanda: "I'm actually thinking of how to ask you on an official date," I laughed softly.

Hlubi: "So you would rather not know about it, my past?" I asked and he look me directly in the eyes.

Yanda: "If you want to share it then it's okay but if you don't that's okay. I'm just glad we're having coffee together," he smiled. I returned the eye contact and we looked into each other's eyes. I can now tell my story without tears so I told it

to him and he cried instead. What the hell? I gave him space and he apologized for crying.

Yanda: "I'm sorry it just got too much for me, a father of a young girl. I'd kill any man who dared to hurt my child. I guess it's also why I'm so grateful to be able to raise her. Some stepfather's are trash so I wouldn't have been at ease with her in another man's care, especially a rude bastard like her stepfather. I'm sorry I'm making this about me," he looked down.

Hlubi: "It's okay I understand. So do you still want that date after all of what I told you?"

Yanda: "Even if getting into prostitution was your choice, I would still have said I want to get to know you. I have no right to judge your past especially one where you were a victim,"

Hlubi: "What about the fact that I've slept with a lot of men?"

Yanda: he took a deep breath
"Honestly I'm more concerned about how it affected you mentally. I think you fear that I'm concerned about how it

affected you physically and though I do hope none of those men hurt you physically permanently, I'm more worried about the psychological effects of such an experience,"

Hlubi: "I'm attending therapy so I'm dealing with that as best I can. Yanda, I don't go around telling people this. Only my family knows this about my life and honestly I was telling you so that you could get off my case yet you're still here. I'm still not sure why but I'm willing to get to know you better too," we smiled.

Yanda: "Thank you and that's all I'm asking. I'm physically attracted to you because you are a beautiful woman but I'm not doing this to get laid at the end of the night. I can see you're not that type of woman. In the past yes, because you were forced but I have a feeling that you're not acting hard to get, you are hard to get," I laughed.

Hlubi: "Yeah, yeah,"

Mbuzo: "So tell me how you got to name yourself, Mahlubandile. I'm guessing your a Hlubi," I nodded. I told him how my name came about. "And you wanted me to not

get to know you when you're such an interesting person?"

We sat and spoke for a long while. In fact we talked until it was time for the restaurant to close. We found Liyema and Lakhawe dancing, more like naughty dancing because his hands were all over her. They stopped when we walked in.

Hlubi: "You guys should have told me you're ready to go. Sorry I made you wait,"

Liyema: "It's okay I wanted to stay," he looked at Yanda.

Yanda: "I was going to make sure she gets home safely. I need to get going. Lakhiwe, congratulations once again,"

Lakhiwe: "Thank you. Hopefully we will see you on our wedding day in a few months too," she smiled.

Yanda: "I'll eagerly await my invitation, thank you," he said while looking at me and Liyema cleared his throat. "Let me get going. We will see each other around," he smiled.

Lakhiwe: "Definitely," she sounded so sure.

Liyema walked Yanda out and said he'll bring the car closer for us. I blushed and Lakhiwe wanted to hear everything before Liyema returned and she was more excited than I am. Am I excited? He makes me feel at ease. I'm 38 years old and I've never had a boyfriend before. What does one even do with a boyfriend?

Lakhiwe: "Will you invite him to the wedding as your partner?"

Hlubi: "And be maid of honor when?," she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "Maybe Liyema might make him a groomsman should he

become our brother in law," she laughed and I blushed.

This woman though. It's too early to be thinking about such. I still don't trust that he has accepted my past though. Why so easily? I mean most men go on about how they want women who have slept with less than ten men and my amount is way above that and he knows it. Could love really make people overlook certain things. I don't even know if he's in love with me. I gave him my number so clearly I must want more or at least find out what he wants from me. How he cried

when I told him about my story because he thought of his daughter let me know that his daughter is his everything. Everything else follows after her and I admire him for it. I've never been lucky to have a father, not one like him and Liyema but to know there are children who do makes my heart warm. I never had a father to show me how I should be treated by a man but my brothers have definitely stepped up and showed me I'm special. I went home with Lakiwe and I know there is no space at their house but I'll even

sleep in the kitchen. I'm still too excited to sleep so she will have to take out ice cream and sit with me. When we arrived home they went to check on their children and suddenly Laksiwe was too tired to watch TV with me, married people though. I went to get a pillow and a blanket and made myself comfortable while watching TV and eating yogurt. This is my second home. My phone beeped and it's from Yanda. I first hid my face in my pillow and blushed before opening the message. He asked if I'm home safe. I blushed even more before

replying to tell him I'm home safe. He called and my heart nearly beat out of my chest. I ran upstairs to Lakhiwe's room but turned around halfway because I knew they were in no mood to be disturbed. I literally shook myself to normal, breathed and answered. Why am I behaving so childishly? I was blushing all throughout that phone call and let out a little scream after I ended the call. I don't know what love is but I know this man makes me lose my sanity. I ended up putting the yogurt in the microwave only to realize when I

was about to switch it on that I'm not supposed to do that. I opened the fridge to cool myself. What the hell is going on? I ended up Googling signs of being in love but stopped while the site was loading. I'm going crazy. It's the only explanation. Do I even want a man with a child? I decided to watch movies and everything that was on had romance in it. I think love is chasing me. Should I give it a chance? I sent him a text to say I'd love to go on a date with him and he replied within seconds with a smiley face. What happened to being hard to

get? I asked myself. I feel like a love struck teen and I'm sure my childish excitement will turn him off but I can't help it. I've never been on a date, not a real one anyway yet he's already invited to my family wedding. I decided to keep my mind busy with the wedding and I wonder what date the couple decided on. It's been years of talking about it so I'm glad we'll be planning now. I've never been to a wedding, let alone be so involved in one because I'll be the Maid of honor. It has been a great couple of years. I'm loved

so much and I hope they now know that I love them too.

SIXTY-FOUR

WEDDING DAY

After months of planning, well technically years Laksiwe and Liyema's wedding day has finally come. They had not seen each other since yesterday morning which is driving both of them insane. Liyema stood on front of the mirror while putting cufflinks on. He looked at Lungi who was busy putting on his shoes and could not have asked for a better

best man. Perhaps a few years ago Vusi would have been the one to take on the role but he and Vusi live two different lives now. The photographer's assistant knocked and let himself on. He said he wanted to ask my groomsman a few questions about the couple. He first went Lungile.

Lungile: "They got hitched without the family five years ago which made me realize that they were together because they chose to not because they had to. They are beautiful people and my inspiration. I know they will only get to see this video once editing

and such is done but I just want to tell the beautiful couple that I love them. Thank you for making me your sixth child when I get a bit out of hand," Lungi's last words left everyone laughing. The camera got turned to Lwazi who is Liyema's groomsman.

Lwazi: "I would first just like to thank bhuti Liyema for making me a part of his team on this special day. I've never been a groomsman and my first being for my older brother makes the experience sweeter. I agree with bhut Lungile they are beautiful people inside and out. I just wish

them a lot of happiness and more love. Sisi you are my hero," he smiled while pointing at the camera. The camera man went on his knees to film the quads. He asked what they want to say to their mother and father.

Bukhosi: "But Tata is standing right there. Why should I speak on the camera when I can go to him?," he asked and everyone laughed.

Liyema: "It's for Mama and I to watch in a few weeks, boy.

Pretend I'm not here," he smiled.

Bubele, "I want to tell them that I love them and they should have a nice wedding day. And they should allow us to eat a lot of sweet stuff today,"

Lungi: "Yes, boy you take advantage of the day," they laughed.

Bandile: "I can't wait to see Mama. Tata says she will be wearing a big white dress. Tata always wears suits so nothing special about that but Mama never wears a big white dress so I want to see her," everyone laughed. "I also wanna tell them to have a nice wedding day and

share the cake we saw with us," he laughed softly.

Banele: "Uhm I wanna tell Mama and Tata that they are cool.

They are nice parents who love us," he said before shying away from the camera. The focus was then on the groom.

Liyema: "Our first wedding still beats any other we are yet to have. It was just us, our witness and official. There was no pressure to be extra so that day is still the best for me. Today we are celebrating with family and that will make the day special.

Baby, I love you so much. I can't

wait to make you my wife again. May fifty more years be added to our union. I can't wait to see you,"

The little moments of the groom and his team getting dressed got captured perfectly. There were nerves but mostly excitement. When the gentlemen were all dressed in their grey suits they went outside the beautiful estate to capture the moment. Liyema looked at his boys and was happy that they could be a part of his team. Getting them all partners was a struggle but the little girls at church were ready to help.

Meanwhile on the other side of the estate Lakiwe was having her make up done while her bridal party got ready too. Hlubi was beyond herself with excitement and Dudu managed to fly out to be a bridesmaid. Lakiwe has been nervous about her wedding day though she married the love of her life almost five years ago. The camera team also did a mini interview with the bride and her team.

Hlubi: "I have so much to say about these two people. I wouldn't have been here today had they not played their part in

my life. So Khi-Khi and Lee, you guys are super humans and we look up to the two of you more than you realize. You made some of us give love a chance because we see how you two love each other. Continue to spread love and may it come back to you ten times more. I love you," she smiled and blew a kiss into the camera. The lady tried to make Dudu speak but she was too shy.

Lakhiwe: "It's okay. I know that she wishes us all the best. I just want to say to Liyema that I love you so much. We've done this before but this time we only have

a bigger audience. I love what we've built so far, baby. I can't wait to see what more we can do together," she smiled and blew kisses.

The designer got Lakhiwe into her off shoulder and low back wedding gown. She has been growing her hair and the hairstylist styled it beautifully using afro textured extensions. When she walked out the ladies cried and the bride got emotional too. They shared a group hug before going out into the beautiful day and taking pre-wedding pictures. The bride's

father couldn't hold back his tears when he saw his daughter. He wished her mother was there to witness it all but he was sure she was there in spirit. It was time to go to the chapel. The boys all ran to Lakiwe when they saw her but their aunt stopped them to first inspect if their hands were clean. Once they had the go ahead they all hugged her. Lakiwe: "Look at you four. You guys are looking so handsome," she kissed their foreheads.

Bubele: "Tata has been waiting for you for so long. Let us go

inside," he took his mother by hand and they laughed.

Bukhosi: "He looks like he is going to cry," they laughed.

Hlubi: "Hey that's my brother but now I'm curious to see him," she laughed.

Lakhiwe: "Come let us stand as rehearsed so I won't keep Tata waiting any longer. Banele stop hitting Bubele on the head and looking away. This is not the time for this. Stand as we showed you please," she said in a stern voice. The children finally behaved and took their places with a partner

by their side. Lakhiwe didn't like that they were to be a part of the groomsmen because she knew how naughty her boys could get but they seemed to be behaving.

Hlubi: "But my man knows how to make people look good. Just look how cute the boys look. These fuckers are so small but already own tailor made suits?," she said to her sister and they laughed.

Lakhiwe: "It's all your brother so don't look at me,"

Hlubi: "But it's good because my man got some business," she smiled.

Lakhiwe: "Listen to you "my man this, my man that" she smiled and Hlubi stuck her tongue out. The best friend shared a hug before it was Hlubi's turn to make her way down the aisle.

Lakhiwe chose not to have a veil because it wouldn't have matched her dress. Her dress had a long trail so that was veil enough for her. Planning the wedding was not easy because every family member wanted to have input. It's true when they say the wedding day is for the family not so much the couple. After months of fights on colours, venue and all else

everything finally came together. Liyema spent a lot which was a problem for Lakhiwe at first but she realized how important sharing this day with their family was. Lakhiwe held her father's arm and took a deep breath before they stood at the entrance of the door. She waited for the music to change to the song neither she nor Liyema were sure of. The soundtrack started but it is not the chosen song. It's supposed to be Endless love by Luther Vandross. Just when Lakhiwe was looking at her

father confused she heard
Liyema's voice from inside.

Liyema: "Ndiyababona bonke
kodwaDali nguwe. I wonder
yintoni na le endenza ndicule
nguwe. Nd'zakubamb'egxeni mihla
yonke yokuphila kwami.

Ndizokukhuthaza nob'izinto
Sezibhek'ecaleni. Umlingani
ngowani na xayengasoz'
Akupholis'amanxeba, mhmm.

Ntombi ndiyabulela zang'indishiy'
Enyanyeni, eh eh ntomb'entle
Ndzabalidwala lakho kude
kuvalwe. Ndyakuthembisa
ntombe'entle Ndzabalidwala lakho
kunaphakadev(uMamTshawe).

Ndzakubabonisa MamTshawe.
Ndizakuthanda kunaphakade.
Ndiyababona bonke kodwa. Dali
nguwe wonder yintoni na le
endenza. Ndicule nguwe," Liyema
sang his own version of Ntando's
"Dali" while he watched his bride
walk down the aisle in tears
towards him. He couldn't go on
because his own tears of joy fell
down his cheek when he looked at
her.

Half of the chapel was in tears
with the couple. When Laksiwe
finally reached the dashing groom
she wrapped her arms around his
waist while he held her face in his

hands. They shared a kiss even before the reverend could tell them to. No one broke the kiss up by singing or anything like that. The only sound coming from the guests were soft admirations. I guess no one minded that they shared a kiss before the ceremony even started because their union was blessed years ago. They already stood before their guests as husband and wife. They broke the kiss and Liyema thanked his father in law for bringing his wife to him. The two walked to the front of the chapel to stand in front of the reverend.

Rev: "Well after that kiss we might as well just go out to the receptionist area and dance," everyone laughed.

The reverend started the ceremony and the two got lost in each other's eyes. A few joke were made by the reverend and the guests were in stitches. The couple exchanged vows and rings were put on. They wore the rings from Jake all these years but this time they chose their own rings. They invited Jake too who has met someone new and they seemed in love. The reverend called their children to the front

so he could bless them as a family. The boys stood and came to the front. Lakhiwe took Amahle who is still not legally theirs and held her. They closed their eyes while the reverend prayed for their marriage to withstand any storms and for their family to keep united and strong. The children went to sit and the couple could finally look and smile at each other again. The reverend pronounced them husband and wife again and they sealed their union with a kiss once again, this time their loved ones were witness. The couple made

their way out were the guests showered them with white rose petals for good luck. The other guests went to get some drinks while the family and close friends took pictures with the couple. The family looked on as the couple took pictures alone. They could feel the love the two shared from a mile away. Soon the children joined in and it became fun yet chaotic. Once everyone had a snap with Mr And Mrs Elephant they made their way to the reception area where a party is about to begin. The MC introduced the couple and they of course had to

have a step. What is an African wedding without a step? When the dancing and excitement was over and everyone was seated the food got served. The elders made speeches as though they spoke to newlyweds but they had some experience in this thing called marriage.

Liyema: "I still think our first was great," he smiled at his wife.

Lakhiwe: "Right? We only had ice cream afterwards. Not this fuss," they laughed.

Liyema: "And it was the first time I got to see all of you

physically and love you. I'm so excited about what we'll do later on as if it's our first wedding night," he kissed his wife.

Lakhiwe: "Maybe it's because it's been weeks since we've been together because someone thought it's a good idea leading up to today," she looked at her husband.

Liyema: "I think I watch too much movies. I hated not being with you. I can not wait to take that dress off," they kissed

Lakhiwe: ", I wish we could go someplace private do you'd do it

right now," she looked at her hubby.

Liyema: "No, baby when I'm turned on the tent in my pants will embarrass me. So no, Liyema think non sexual things," he said and his wife laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I'm already wet though," she teased.

Liyema: "Lakhiwe Elephant, no" he said with a smile. "Damn, baby. Don't make me imagine that not now please," they both laughed.

Lakhiwe: "I love you," she kissed him.

Liyema: "I love you,"

Lakhiwe: "And the singing when I walked down the aisle was the best part of today. Thank you,"

Liyema: "I'll sing for you until my voice no longer comes out," he smiled.

They went to join their family and friends on the dance floor.

Lakhiwe looked over at Hlubi and Yanda who looked happy. She prayed that Yanda would protect Hlubi's heart. She acts tough just like Liyema but deep down they are soft, Lungi too. Lakhiwe looked at her husband who was nearly on the floor getting down and laughed. They were happy

and surrounded by loved ones who were there to celebrate them and it warmed the bride's heart. Hours went by and the couple thanked their guests for coming before they left to spend the night at a hotel for privacy. The kids went home with their grandmothers because they fell asleep. The couple said goodbye to their guests and thanked them again before leaving them. Some guests like the uncle's stayed behind for the open bar since they claim it can't go to waste because it's paid for. Liyema opened the door for his wife and got in the

car himself. The two couldn't help but steal kisses while driven to the hotel. Liyema wanted to rip the dress off Lakhiwe's body so badly but he couldn't. They finally arrived in their suite and their lips met hungrily before they even closed the door behind them. He knew Lakhiwe was not wearing a bra because her dress had no straps and he wanted to kiss her warm breasts so badly. He pulled the zip of there dress down and watched it fall to the floor. He first just took in the beauty in front of him before he touched her more. Lakhiwe watched as

her husband looked at her like she was magic. He unbuttoned his shirt to reveal his bare chest and she could feel the warmth between her legs intensen. This time their wedding night was less pressured. She didn't have to wonder if he'll love certain parts of her body and hate some. He's been making love to her for years. He knew which spots to give extra attention to because he knew those were her soft spots. Those spots that when his hands touched she melted. Liyema walked closer to her and he loved that non of them were nervous

too. Laksiwe knew he loves it when she plants traces of moist kisses on his neck. She too knew his body well. He picked her up and put her on the bed. He wanted to skip foreplay but he had to see what she wanted first. They kissed passionately and their mouths showed love to other parts of their bodies but neither could take it anymore. Liyema slid into her moist folds and she said his name out of pleasure as she felt him unite with her. It was not a long round but it left them both breathing heavily and

satisfied. He looked at her and she was crying.

Liyema: "Lala, what's wrong?," he asked but she just shook her head quickly. "Was I too rough,?"

Liyema started to be concerned

Lakhiwe: "I just love you, Liyema. I don't know what I did to deserve this life with you. I just love being with you in every way. I'm sorry for crying again like the first time. Who even cries during sex?" she wiped her tears off.

Liyema: "My wife does," they both laughed softly. "I love you too. I

love being with you in every way too," he kissed her.

They held each other while they spoke about the highlights of their wedding day. Liyema went to get a warm towel for her. He had gotten used to the no condom things years ago. They kissed and things got heated once again.

This time it was not slow love making. They were rough and explored more. They both still hoped to be able to adopt Amahle but Liyema wished his wife could get pregnant. Especially now that they can conceive naturally but he will not bring it up only to make

her feel bad. He thought he only wanted two kids growing up but now that they have five, he knows he is a man who would love at least six. They loved one another and though storms will come their way and shake their marriage they hope to be strong enough to fight whatever evil tests them.

Hlubi

Five months and three days. That's how long Yanda and I have been in a relationship. I've met his beautiful daughter and she is the sweetest little person I've ever met. My nephews are

sweet too but they are monsters sometimes I tell you. Nandipha will be turning eleven this month and she is smart. I find myself talking about her with my friends at school and with my family. My family insisted on meeting Yanda but not as Liyema's client but as my boyfriend. They asked him millions of questions and Zola made some friendly threats should he hurt me. The creepy thing is that I know she'll do as she said she would should ge hurt me. My mother is an ocean of secrets. The wedding was everything I imagined and more. To see love

like that has been the best feeling ever. Yanda and I are taking it a day at a time.

Nandipha is at her grandmother's for the weekend since her dad has been at the wedding. He looked so handsome in a navy blue suit. We danced and I felt like I was a part of a fairytale. I told him something I could see shocked him. I told him I want to go home with him, to his place. He asked if I'm sure a million times and I had to say yes a million times. Zola was not happy because I've never slept out unless I'm at Liyema's or Lungi's

place but never where there is no family for support. I'm nervous but I feel ready. We haven't had sex, nor cuddled. Just kissed and hugged. I don't know if I want to have sex with him tonight but I do want to be in his arms. I did however get condoms so maybe a part of me wants us to have sex. We were both nervous on our way. One could hear it in the sound of our voices. We arrived at his house and I'm putting a lot of trust in this man. I hope he won't try anything but I've got my tazer and pepper spray. He lives in an apartment, he is

renting. He is also the sole breadwinner to his family so he keeps apologizing for not giving me the life my family can but I really admire that he looks after his family. In the past few months he has said the "L" word a few times but I haven't. He opened the door and his place is clean. It's a two bedroom flat for himself and his child. He is not rich but he is not poor either. I believe his business will grow and become an international brand. He was in corporate for years and only went back to pursue his passion after years in corporate

so it's still early days for his brand. Local celebrities have worn his clothes a few times. I know because I saved the pictures of those celebs in my man's clothes on my phone because I'm so proud of him. Liyema and his team looked great because of him. We both awkwardly sat in the lounge. I think he wanted me to lead. I asked to go freshen up since it's been a long day. He gave me a fresh towel and I went to shower. I packed an overnight bag too. When I finished he used the bathroom. What should I do when he comes out? Why did I

even ask to spend the night if I'll make things awkward for both of us?. He stepped out the bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his lower body. He keeps his body in shape for a man in his forties. I sat on the couch with my pajamas on waiting for him to come from the room. He came out with only his underwear on. I felt myself get hot flashes. I looked at him for a long while. He caught me staring.

Yanda: "Am I making you uncomfortable?" he looked concerned.

Hlubi: "No, you hot man," I blurted out. "I'm sorry I just tend to think out loud," I looked down and he laughed.

Yanda: "I don't mind, baby," he smiled and came closer to kiss my forehead. It was sweet but I wanted his lips on mine so I kissed him. It is our first passionate kiss but he stopped it. "Hlubi, I love this but it's a little torture for me because my body is kinda betraying me already and I don't want to freak you out. I'm excited that you want to spend the night but I didn't prepare myself for anything sexual out of

respect for you but such kisses just take me there," he said softly and I smiled.

Hlubi: "I want to take it there," I said quickly. He looked at me.

Yanda: "Sex, tonight, now?" He looked at me and I nodded.

Hlubi: "If you want to. Maybe you don't and if so I'll understand. You know what just screw that forget I said anything," I became defensive because I feared his rejection.

Yanda: "I'd love to but you need to be sure. I don't have condoms though so..."

Hlubi: "I have some. Not sure if it's the brand you'd usually use but I bought two different brands just in case," I said while breathing heavily.

Yanda: "Nana, breath," he held my cheek and I took a deep breath.

"I'm sure the brands you chose are okay but are you sure?" I nodded quickly.

He closed the gap between us and my heart is about to come out of my mouth, at least it felt like it.

Our lips met once again but he was keeping things innocent. My mind was blank because I was just in the moment. I'm about to

have sex with a boyfriend for the first time in my entire life though I'm no virgin. He picked me up from the couch and walked to his bedroom. We were looking at each other all the way until he put me on his bed. My chest was moving up and down indicating how nervous I am. He got on top of me and between my thighs and we kissed. I could feel him grow harder between my thighs. It turned me on so much. He smells so good and feels so warm. He looked at me and slowly lifted my top up but paused when he had to reveal my boobs to look at me.

I nodded to tell him I'm still okay. My top was off and my nipples got a bit erect, I hate how big they are sometimes. This man kissed and caressed each part of my upper body. I'm experienced at this but I didn't know what to do with myself because I don't want to give him prostitute sex. I want to give him girlfriend sex but I'm not sure how that is done or if they are even different. Soon we were both naked and I decided to do something and not lay like a dead fish. So I caressed his body with my hands while kissing every part of him I could.

I loved how gentle and slow he was because he kept checking if I'm still okay with everything. I gave him the condoms and he chose the one he preferred to use. His hands were shaking so I held them and asked him what's wrong. A part of me feared that he is thinking about my past.

Yanda: "I'm sorry, sthandwa Sam. I'm just nervous. I want this to be perfect for you because I don't want anything I do to cause some flashbacks of your trauma," he said while looking at me. Is this man fucken kidding me? I almost cried.

Hlubi: "I'm still good. Thank you for being a gentleman," I kissed him. I think I love him too.

We kissed the nerves off and continued. When the protection was on he positioned himself between my legs and looked at me. I took his dick myself and directed it to where I wanted it to be. I haven't done this in years but I'm no virgin so everything should go smoothly. I love him naked as much as I do when he is in those suits of his. I felt him move at a slow rhythm and I met his thrusts. A part of me worried if he was enjoying it. What is on his

mind?. I decided to let go and enjoy when he let out soft groans. I loved the moment so much. I didn't want any of it to end. His thrusts became quicker and it drove me crazy. We made eye contact while we were on the moment and I realized that I love this man. I was enjoying the moment but felt a sharp pain each time he moved in. I tried to bare with it until he came but it was too painful so I stopped him, I had to. Goodness he didn't even yell at me for doing so instead immediately stopped and I can only imagine how difficult it must

be for him to do so. I told him what's wrong.

Yanda: "You're bleeding. Did you get your periods?" he looked at me. I looked at my thigh and bed and I am bleeding. I'm not on my periods either. I know my dates. I looked at him. I'm feeling so ashamed and I ran to the bathroom and locked the door. Why is this happening now? I sat on the floor and cried. The doorknob turned but he couldn't get in. "Hlubi, please open the door," he pleaded softly.

Hlubi: "I can't... I don't know what happened, Yanda. I'm not on my periods," I cried.

Yanda: "More reason for you to let me in because something might be wrong. Are you sore?" the gentleness in this man's voice just made me cry more.

Hlubi: "A bit,"

Yanda: "Unlock the door please. You've got no reason to be ashamed or embarrassed. I love you so open the door because I'm going crazy with worry out here while I don't know what you're going through in there,"

Hlubi: "I ruined everything,"

Yanda: "Well good thing we'll get to try again someday and I loved every second so nothing got ruined. Open the door now please," I stood from behind the door and stupid me got his floor red too. I took toilet paper to wipe it. I feel so bad. I opened the door for him. I was still naked but covered my body with my hands and cried when I saw him. He ran to me and held me. I expected him to call a cab for me and tell me to get the hell out of his place but no. He went to the shower and turned it on. He stepped into the

shower with me and held me so tightly. The bleeding stopped I think but I watched as the blood mixed with water go down the drain. I was in pain but it's not period pain. I turned to face him and I felt defeated but he smiled. He got a towel and we got ourselves dry and got dressed because he said he's driving me to the ER. When we arrived he carried me inside because in his man brain I couldn't walk but I actually loved the care. The doctor examined me with him present in the room. She then said she needs to insert

Something in my private and that I might feel some pain. I'm sure it's not bad but when it did go in whatever it was I cried. It lasted about ten seconds and she said she'll be right back. Yanda got on the bed with me brushing my shaking thighs. I'm sure he will tell me never to call him again after this. X-rays were done and more tests and the doctor asked if ever had my tubed tied.

Hlubi: "Yes," I said softly.

Dr: "What kind of procedure was this?"

Hlubi: "I don't know but that guy said something about rings when he did it so we won't fall pregnant," I looked at Yanda who was looking down.

DR: "Well he didn't do a proper job at it. I'll have to remove those rings Because they are causing you to bleed,"

Yanda: "An operation?"

Dr: "Things have improved now, sir. We will only make small incisions to fix the problem," she smiled.

Yanda: "So you're admitting her?,"

Dr: "She won't even stay long. Should all go as planned, you can take her home in a few a hours. Let me go prepare for the procedure. I don't suggest that you have your tubed tied again. You should sue your doctor for how he did it too. I will give you all your records to the legal team when you want. I'll be back now," she smiled and left.

Yanda: "Should I call your family?"

Hlubi: "No they are all still so happy from the wedding. You heard the doctor it's not a big operation and I won't have to stay here overnight," I faked a

smile. "You can go too if you want," I looked at him.

Yanda: "I'll stay and drive you home once all is done," he smiled I'm sure it's forced.

The doctor returned and I was taken to another room but Yanda was not allowed in with me. He'll be gone when I come out and change his number so I won't get hold of him I'm sure. I was put to sleep so I won't feel any pain. I don't know what they will do to me but as long as I never bleed again. The guy Mike had the procedure do on us was a male nurse. He did it at home and the

place was not even clean. Mike didn't want us to get pregnant by our clients and I'm glad he thought of that. Had we become pregnant he would definitely have had us abort. The time with Yanda was great but it ends today, I'm sure. I woke up after the procedure in the recovery room. The doctor said all went well. That she removed the rings that tied my tubed and she said they weren't supposed to have used those kinds to do it. She also said I should go on contraceptives if I'm sexual active Because I can fall pregnant . I thanked her

and she said I can go in two hours or more. I laid there crying. I won't bother my family. I wiped my tears when Yanda came in holding one of those get well balloons. I thought he left. He kissed me and gave me the balloon.

Yanda: "Don't get too attached to it because the security might come get it. I borrowed it from a man whose room is filled with them," we both laughed.

Hlubi: "Thanks, thief. I thought you left," I looked at him.

Yanda: "Wouldn't you have loved to be right because I know that's what you expected. I'm here and I'll stay until you can go home,"

Hlubi: "I don't want to go home, Yanda. Once they know they will fuss and I'll take the happy mood left by the wedding away. I'll ask to stay here a few more days,"

Yanda: "Well we can go to my place. I've always wanted to nurse someone to health," we laughed. "I'm not leaving you here while you're health. You just need to rest so you'll recover,"

Hlubi: "You sure after what you saw?"

Yanda: "Nana, I meant it when I said I'm in this relationship with purpose. I don't know what your mind is telling you about my intentions but it's fooling you. I hate that when I'm with you in deep in thought you assume I'm thinking about your past. It hurts me because I don't think about it. It's the past, dead and buried. I don't live there,"

Hlubi: "I just find it difficult to believe. I'm sorry for hurting your feelings. I'm still new to this. I loved what happened earlier on

even if this ruined it. I think I've made progress," he smiled.

Yanda: "I loved it too and I can't wait to do it again when you're all good," I smiled.

Hours went by and they let me go after four hours in the early morning. Yanda took me to his place and he even put the dirty sheet in the washing machine. It wasn't soaked in blood just a few drops. He changed the sheet and carried me from the couch to the bed. I'm still very sore and I'll tell my family just not today, especially not the newlyweds. I laid on my side eating chips while

he laid behind me. We were watching movies on his laptop. I moved closer to him to close the gap between us and he put his arm under my head and the other on my hip.

Hlubi: "Yanda," I said softly.

Yanda: "Hmmm?"

Hlubi: "I love you too, Mr Mbuzo," I turned my head to look at him and all teeth were out.

Yanda: "Thank you, MaMlambo," he kissed me. I turned to face him.

Hlubi: "Ouch,"

Yanda: "Careful," I finally faced him.

Hlubi: "Please don't hurt me. If you're tired of me please tell me and not cheat on me," he kissed me.

Yanda: "The nice thing about being in your 40's is that you know life by now. I know what I want and don't want. What I'm looking for us right on this bed with me. I know I'm a boring man which made a lot of ladies choose to walk away. I'm hoping that I excite you enough even in my boring life to make you want to stay," he looked down.

Hlubi: "I've got enough excitement for the both of us. If you were above my level of excitement I'd have found you boring. So you excite me. I love that you are calm while I'm crazy. I love that you think twice before saying a swear word too,"

Yanda: "I have no choice or Nandipha will make me put money in the swear jar," we both laughed.

Hlubi: "Do you trust me around her?"

Yanda: "She trusts you around her so I do, Nana. I look forward to seeing what we grow into,"

Hlubi: "Me too. I love how you love your child, Yaya. If you were a bad father I'd have kicked you in the balls," he laughed.

Yanda: "Wow okay," he smiled. "Are you agreeing to being my girlfriend officially?"

Hlubi: "You didn't ask me to be, Myirha,"

Yanda: "Mahlubandile Elephant, princess of the Hlubi clan will you please be my woman, my love, my friend?" I blushed.

Hlubi: "Yanda Mbuzo, prince of the Zondi clan, I would love to be your person. I'd love to get to know you and your baby," he kissed me.

Yanda: "Thank you for including her. You are beautiful," I blushed.

We kissed and kissed while I giggled between. Of course I'd include his child. I would never do anything or be a part of anything that would harm Nandipha. If she allows me I'd love to be her friend. Since her mother is distant she'll need someone to tell her about periods, boys and such.

Those little things a little girl can't talk to her father about I'll

proudly step in but only if she allows me. I'm in love and I had my first genuine sexual experience that was filled with gentleness, kindness, love and patience. He's seen so much and knows so much yet he chooses to stay. He must really love me. I look forward to finishing what we started earlier on once I've recovered. Something tells me that he is those gentle guys in bed well he just invited a little freak in his bed so I hope it won't scare him. He's been wanting to introduce me to his mother but I was not ready but I'm considering doing it. We are

yet to learn more about each other. I asked if he wants more kids and he said only if I'll be the mother. I laughed it off but deep down I wish it could happen someday. I'm old so time is not on my side but with modern medicine who knows. I brushed his face with my fingers while he looked into my eyes, my soul rather. I kissed his forehead, his cheek, his nose, his chin and finally his lips. It's true that the right man doesn't see broken when they look at a woman with a dark past, they see beauty. I can see in his eyes that he is genuine about

what he says he feels. I hope we can grow this and perhaps become a real family. Tonight proved that I'm comfortable with him in every way. I look at him and I feel myself waving goodbye to my past and greeting my future, one where I'm loved not only by my family but by my man and hopefully his daughter too. We cuddled with our faces so close to each other I felt his warm breath on my face until we both feel asleep. "Dear past, thank you for the lessons but it's time to leave you behind so that I can grow. I most certainly won't miss

you. Dear Future, I'm ready for all the good I feel you have in store for me,"

THE END.

SEASON TWO LOADING...